

**A New Deal for Writers:
The Alabama Writers' Project and Its Contributions to American History**

by

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Abstract

At the height of the Great Depression and the New Deal, administrators and staff of the Federal Writers' Project embarked on a series of literary undertakings to uncover and restore the nation's cultural and historical landscape. Amongst the most popular and significant of these assignments were the *American Guide Series* and Oral History Projects. Under these projects, staff produced guidebooks for every state, conducted and transcribed thousands of interviews with former slaves and ordinary Americans, and documented America's folk traditions. This thesis serves to fill a gap in the historiography of the Federal Writers' Project by examining its efforts at the state level in Alabama. It analyzes Alabama's contribution to the Guidebook and Oral History Projects by exploring and evaluating the Alabama Project, its staff, and its accomplishments. It traces the background and organization of the Alabama Writers' Project, reviews the guidelines and constraints placed upon administrators and workers, examines Alabama's personnel and their achievements, and assesses materials it produced. Although scholars and the public neglected the Project's materials for decades, this thesis claims that the guidebook and oral histories reshaped perceptions of the state's culture and history. In later years, scholars and the public rediscovered these materials and deemed them valuable sources of historical information, incorporating the guidebook and oral histories into their own projects.

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INTRODUCTION

“The Arts Project of WPA was, perhaps, one of the noblest and most absurd undertakings ever attempted by any state. Noblest because no other state has ever cared whether its artists as a group lived or died... Yet absurd, because a state can only function bureaucratically and impersonally.”

– W. H. Auden, introduction to *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, 1950

In the midst of the economic crises of the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Federal Writers’ Project, a New Deal program under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Instituted in 1935, the Federal Writers’ Project was one of several relief programs under the WPA aimed at providing work to those in the arts. The Writers’ Project’s payroll included writers, editors, researchers and other professionals, who, through the Project, would achieve many literary, historical, and cultural accomplishments.

The Roosevelt administration launched the New Deal initiative to restore the United State’s economy following the stock market crash of 1929 that subsequently led to one of the worst depressions in history. By 1933, the year Roosevelt assumed office, unemployment affected a quarter of the nation’s workforce, leaving 34 million Americans without means to support themselves.¹ The New Deal consisted of numerous federal relief programs for the unemployed, as well as reforms to the financial system in

¹ Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2008), 1.

order to prevent such an event from happening again. The WPA was its largest program, and employed a total of 8.5 million workers between 1935 and 1943. Roosevelt proposed a \$1.5 billion budget in its first year, and over eight years spent roughly \$10.5 billion.² Designed to generate jobs, stimulate the economy, and restore morale, WPA jobs were primarily for workers without specific skill sets, or blue-collar workers. It funded practical projects that restored the country's infrastructure, and over the course of eight years constructed or repaired 651,087 miles of highways, roads and streets, 124,031 bridges, 125,110 public buildings, 8,192 public parks, 853 airports, and roughly 700 miles of airport runways.³

Although this manual labor transformed or repaired some of the nation's most significant physical landscapes, one division of the WPA was dedicated to restoring the nation's creative and cultural landscapes by providing jobs for artists, musicians, actors, and writers. This division, termed Federal One, consisted of five arts programs that furnished artists with jobs in their field, allowing them to utilize their talents and preserve their particular trade. By utilizing and preserving these skills, Federal One restored confidence to artists in deep poverty and despair while creating and promoting American art and culture, giving Americans access to what President Roosevelt called a more "abundant life."⁴ Federal One consisted of the Federal Music Project, Federal Art

² Ibid., 3.

³ T.H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 249; Taylor, 523-524.

⁴ In response to the hardships many Americans faced during the Great Depression, President Roosevelt challenged the people to find "a more abundant life" and attempted to improve the quality of living through increasing cultural opportunities along with economic opportunities. The United States National Archives and Records Administration, "A New Deal of the Arts," accessed July 14, 2010 at http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/index.html.

Project, Federal Theatre Project, Federal Writers' Project, and the Historical Records Survey.

While the Music, Art, and Theatre Projects produced great American masterpieces that defined the era and the Historical Records Survey assessed and indexed important American archival collections, the Federal Writers' Project documented the nation's history and mapped the cultural landscape for future generations. Project employees and administrators composed some of the nation's greatest literary works and left behind numerous cultural records. These literary works and records remain an important contribution to the New Deal era and American history.

Throughout its eight years of activity, the Writers' Project employed between 3,500 and 6,700 total personnel, amounting to approximately two percent of the WPA workforce, and received less than one percent of the total WPA budget. Although the government allotted a mere fraction of the overall WPA staff and appropriations, the Writers' Project produced more than 276 books, 701 pamphlets, and 340 "issuances" (articles, leaflets, radio scripts).⁵ Among the most popular and significant of the Writers' Project's literary endeavors were the Guidebook Project and the Oral History Projects. Guidebook Project personnel researched and wrote travel guides for every state, region, and major city in the country, culminating in the publication of the *American Guide Series*, while Oral History Project personnel conducted and transcribed thousands of oral histories with former slaves and ordinary Americans, and documented countless folklore traditions.

⁵ William Stott, introduction to *Remembering America: A Sampler of the WPA American Guide Series* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-2.

During its tenure, many Americans appreciated the Federal Writers' Project for its ability to provide work of substance that took their minds off the economic situation. Writers gained the satisfaction of maintaining their craft while receiving a paycheck, while others, who remained the majority throughout the Project, learned about writing and the literary industry. Numerous Project workers, including Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, went on to become some of America's most notable writers after gaining experience with the Project. Additionally, in absorbing "genetic information about their country and its people," the social framework of America, writers obtained new material to work with and changed the American literary scene.⁶ Furthermore, by using modified interview techniques to record American's stories, the Oral History Projects improved ways of documenting history. Although many of the writing staff enjoyed these more immediate benefits, it took decades for academics and the broader public to realize the full extent of the Project's cultural and historical contributions.

The Federal Arts Programs celebrated America and the American people through uncovering and promoting the country's past, character, culture, and traditions. Its objectives were to produce art that focused on the individual, promoted local and regional history, served practical purposes, and reached the broader American public. These objectives aligned with the broader New Deal sentiment, and were nationalistic in nature.⁷ To comply with these objectives, the Project carefully selected undertakings that documented the lives of the individual, produced local and regional histories,

⁶ Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 373.

⁷ National Archives and Records Administration, "A New Deal for the Arts," accessed at www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/index.html.

commissioned utilitarian projects such as travel guides, and generated products that made America easily accessible to the broader public. These undertakings, primarily the Guidebook and Oral History Projects, redefined and transformed the cultural and historical landscapes for future generations.

To analyze the Writers' Project's contributions to American culture and its impact on 1930s America, this thesis explores the Project and its activities in Alabama.

Although the Federal Project originated in Washington, DC, state-level staffers were responsible for carrying out Project programs and for following the guidelines set forth by the national office. These men and women formed the backbone of the Writers' Project, as it was the state offices that administered daily operations. Shifting the focus from the typical national perspective to a more intimate look at how the project operated within Alabama contributes to a greater understanding of how local realities often impeded or altered the plans and goals of the federally led project. Similarly, analyzing the Alabama Project provides insight into how, through carrying out state-wide Project programs, state staffers were able to create a more inclusive history of the state. By including diverse populations in the narrative, these state-level employees most familiar with Alabama's characteristics produced a story more representative of the people living in Alabama than previous histories.

Through surveying and evaluating the government's efforts at the Alabama level, this thesis demonstrates how the federal government carried out its goals of uncovering what made America, "America," and highlights the importance the Project placed on the individual. Using the Alabama Writers' Project as a case study, it examines the Project's formation and organization; decisions behind the Guidebook and Oral History Projects;

Project guidelines and the administrative constraints placed on Project staff; balance between state and federal editorial offices; and materials produced by the Alabama Project. The thesis reveals how Project staff captured the characteristics that made the state distinctly “Alabama,” and assesses how the Project enriched and informed the lives of Alabamians. By demonstrating the enduring value of Alabama’s material and exploring the Project at the state-level, this analysis provides context to the larger national Project’s efforts, rendering insight into the Federal Writers’ Project’s legacy.

The Alabama Project is important because it represents and highlights larger national goals and reflects issues many state offices encountered, particularly in the South. The Project demonstrates a wide range of activities as it participated in all of the national assignments, including the guidebook, life histories, slave narratives, and folklore, as well as creating pamphlets and brochures about the state’s natural resources, offering a comprehensive representation of the Federal Writers’ Project. Additionally, the Alabama Project faced its share of adversity, such as difficulty hiring experienced authors, office disputes, and battles for control between the state and local editorial offices. More importantly, previous historical narratives of the state defined Alabama’s past according to the “great white male” interpretations, a narrative that the Alabama Writers’ Project fought to transform.

This thesis examines two of Alabama’s influential undertakings, the Guidebook Project and Oral History Projects, to determine how the Alabama Project accomplished providing a more inclusive history of its state. This thesis argues that the Writers’ Project programs in the state had both immediate and long-term effects on Alabama’s culture and history. Through their efforts, the Project writers successfully recorded the histories and

cultures of groups within the state that had previously received only minor attention in state histories. The stories collected and preserved by the Alabama Writers' Project illuminated the contributions of these marginalized segments of Alabamian society, long overshadowed by more traditional narratives. Through the staff's work, no longer would Alabama's history remain the domain of the rich and white. Instead, the Project ensured that future researchers would have the means to integrate the perspectives of every group that called Alabama home. Though Project administrators found audiences unreceptive of their work at the time and years passed before the materials gained recognition, scholars and the public would come to value these rich repositories of historical data decades later. Amid the rise of the new social history and renewed popularity of local history in later decades, the Project found a new audience more receptive to its publications.

Since the 1970s, scholars have become increasingly interested in the Federal Writers' Project and publications on the subject increased; however, prior to this decade the public generally neglected the arts programs in their works after the Great Depression. As the nation recovered and enjoyed a healthier economy following World War II, the economic crisis became a distant memory as Americans avoided thinking about hard times and the remaining scars of destitution. By the 1970s, the arts programs and their accomplishments reemerged in the public and scholarly world, as scholars began discussing them as an innate part of the 1930s. Additionally, with the bicentennial on the horizon publishers revised and reissued the guidebooks for public use.⁸ In 1969 a team of scholars, led by William F. McDonald, published a detailed study of the origins

⁸ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 372.

and administrative history of the programs. McDonald based this comprehensive study on official records and personal interviews with participants.⁹

Most scholarship on the Federal Writers' Project to date has focused on the Project at the national level; few authors have chronicled the Writers' Project at the state level.¹⁰ Although discussions of the Alabama Project appear in some of the overarching literature, these discussions are largely from the national office point of view. In this literature, Alabama appears predominantly in terms of comparing the Alabama Project with writers' projects in other Southern states, as well as examining the controversy between its state director Myrtle Miles and the central editorial staff. This thesis further contributes to historiography on the Alabama Project by addressing its administrative history, organization, accomplishments, and legacy from the state's perspective.

In 1972, Jerre Mangione chronicled the Writers' Project in his memoirs as a national editor, and drew attention to the administrative side of the Federal Writers' Project. Mangione's *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project* offers an inside look at the administrative history of the Project at the federal level. Mangione primarily focuses on administrative aspects as they relate to the *American Guide Series*, and offers extensive insight into the conception of the guides. In addition, Mangione highlights reasons behind the rise and fall of the Project. Complementing Mangione's memoir, Monty Noam Penkower contributed a scholarly book on the national Project in

⁹ William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Art* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969).

¹⁰ George T. Blakey, *Creating a Hoosier Self-Portrait: The Federal Writers' Project in Indiana, 1935-1942* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Christine Bold, *Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists: The WPA Writers' Project in Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

1977. A more comprehensive administrative history, Penkower's *The Federal Writers' Project* provides insight into the guides, oral histories, and creative writings alike.¹¹

More recent scholars have bypassed administrative histories of the Project to review the cultural and historical significance of the Project material. Christine Bold's *The WPA Guides* (1999) provides a cultural and literary look into the Project and its accomplishments. Focusing on the *American Guide Series* project, Bold details the editorial conflicts between the national and state offices and its impact on the Project's activities, ultimately concluding that the tension between these two entities manipulated the finished product.¹² From literary to cultural studies, Jerrold Hirsch's *Portrait of America* (2009) serves as a cultural and intellectual history of the Federal Writers' Project. Hirsch discusses how the Project brought the issues of nationalism and cultural pluralism to the forefront through its focus on inclusiveness in the *American Guide Series* and oral histories.¹³ Most recently, David Taylor's *Soul of a People* (2009) narrates the history of the Writers' Project through the eyes of its writers, exposing the individuals who often remained anonymous in the Project's publications.¹⁴ Additionally, other secondary sources on the Great Depression and New Deal discuss the Federal Writers' Project at least in brief, such as Nick Taylor's *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA* (2008).¹⁵

¹¹ Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

¹² Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

¹³ Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁴ David A. Taylor, *Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009).

¹⁵ Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2008).

The introduction to the compilation of Alabama Life Histories, *Up Before Daylight* (1982), as well as the most recent edition of the Alabama guidebook, renamed *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama* (2000), provides insight into the Alabama Project specifically.¹⁶ James Seay Brown's introduction to *Up Before Daylight* details the inspiration behind the Life History Projects and evaluates Alabama's Life Histories. Although it touches on several administrative aspects of the Alabama Project, more importantly Brown introduces his reader to several of the more prominent writers on Alabama's staff. Additionally, Harvey H. Jackson's introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama* offers rich detail on the Alabama Project's administration. Emphasizing the development of the guidebook, Jackson brings to life some of the hardships Project staff faced while completing the work. Jackson's introduction also provides analyses of the guidebook's essays, and addresses the book's potential as a resource for students of Alabama history. Although both are important sources, the Alabama Project has thus far lacked scholarly works on the Projects. This thesis will help fill this void through its comprehensive analysis of the Alabama Project, focusing on its programs and their contributions to both scholars and the public.

In the early 1930s, unemployment rates for writers and writing personnel increased along with national rates. The government developed the Federal Writers' Project in response to the high numbers of jobless writers. Writing for a living had long been a perilous and unstable profession, as the nature of the freelance writer's bohemian lifestyle often left even established authors in a constant struggle for money. The

¹⁶ James Seay Brown, Jr. (ed.), *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories from the Alabama Writers' Project, 1938-1939* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1982); Harvey H. Jackson, III, Federal Writers' Project's *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2000).

depression still caught writers unprepared however, and their ability to provide food and shelter by working in their trade vastly diminished.

The Writers' Project resulted from the Roosevelt administration's recognition that writers needed relief work, too. In 1934, only fifteen American authors could claim their books sold at least 50,000 copies, and by 1935 established authors whose books normally sold more than 10,000 copies saw royalties drop 50 percent below what they were before the start of the depression. The economic collapse was particularly grueling for the publishing industry. From 1929 to 1933 proceeds from non-textbook publications were cut in half; only 9,035 new books and book editions were printed in 1931-1932, a decrease of 1,272 from the previous year, and numbers continued to fall by another 950 by the end of 1933. The depression affected the newspaper and magazine industries as well. As advertisements reached an all-time low, many newspapers and magazines resorted to consolidations and cutbacks while others folded altogether.¹⁷ With the industry deteriorating, many established and free-lance authors, editors, and newspapermen throughout the country were without jobs. By March of 1935, approximately 1,400 Americans on the relief rolls listed writer or journalist as their occupation; many more existed but refused to succumb to the shame of applying for relief. The process of applying for relief was often humiliating, as one had to prove they were "broke" by relief eligibility standards. If forced to submit to this embarrassment, most writers preferred their own relief program rather than participate in manual labor under the Civilian Conservation Corps or Tennessee Valley Authority programs. Most writers felt ill-equipped for these employment opportunities, as they had little or no

¹⁷ Penkower, 4-5.

training and experience for anything except their *métier*.¹⁸ Government assistance for these individuals proved critical to the American literary scene for writers to preserve and use their talents.

Although government support of writers and artists existed prior to the 1930s through organizations such as the Commission of Fine Arts in 1910, the United States had never attempted a large national support for the arts. Public demand for the government support grew in the months leading up to Roosevelt's establishment of the Federal Writers' Project. Programs such as the Public Works of Art Project, established under the Civil Works Administration in 1933, supplied jobs to writers on a state-to-state basis, but it only provided work for 1,000 writers.¹⁹ On February 25, 1935, dissatisfied writers held a protest outside the New York Port Authority Building, calling for "the government to give them work befitting their talents." Demonstrators held signs with phrases such as "Children need books. Writers need a break. We demand projects."²⁰ The first writer's demonstration to occur throughout the poverty-stricken United States, it contributed to mounting tension between private writing groups lobbying for jobs and government agencies. Although the protests did little to directly influence government officials, it did demonstrate the marked desperation of writers across the nation as even notable writers of the decade, such as Maxwell Bodenheim, protested their lack of work opportunities. Protests reached the public's ear as well as writing groups such as the Authors' League of America, League of American Writers, and the Unemployed Writers'

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

Association. These groups took writers' demands to government officials, spurring the Roosevelt administration to look for relief programs for special groups such as writers.

Creating the Federal Writers' Project as a relief program, along with the other arts programs, grew from an idea proposed by Edward Bruce. Bruce, an international financier turned professional painter, was interested in the federal government's support for artists to create work "appropriate in design and quality for the adornment of public buildings."²¹ In a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, Bruce contended that artistic movements have never developed without a patron and at present the only way to set the nation's artists working again was through the United States government.²² A great lover of the arts throughout her life, the First Lady became the program's most ardent supporter, both publicly and privately. Eleanor asserted it was a government's duty to encourage American culture and artistic expression by respecting and supporting the nation's great talent, and it was unbelievable that such a "great nation could fail to utilize...its creative talents to the fullest."²³ With help from Bruce and the WPA's national administrator Harry Hopkins Eleanor pressed the President on the issue. Through executive order on June 25, 1935, Roosevelt created the first nation-wide sponsorship of the arts. A team of administrators that included Harry Hopkins, Henry Alsberg, Jacob Baker, and Katharine Kellock envisioned the details of the program. Though the concept had roots in the Public Works of Art Project and the Unemployed Writers' Association, this level of nation-wide art sponsorship was unprecedented. Eleanor, often regarded as the

²¹ Allida M. Black, *Castling Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 34.

²² McDonald, 360-361.

²³ Black, 33-34.

“godmother of the Project,” remained deeply involved in the programs throughout its tenure, especially the Writers’ Project.²⁴

Although the Writers’ Project gave hope to thousands of writers, the program, along with the rest of the WPA, received frequent public criticism from conservative opponents. Their principal criticism was it wasted federal money on “make-work,” or unnecessary projects. Critics mocked workers as shovel leaners, and scoffed that “WPA” really stood for “We Poke Along” or “We Piddle Around.” Critics often used the expression “boondoggle” in reference to jobs under the WPA, a term the *New York Times* introduced to the public through an April 1935 article complaining about the amount of money spent on “recreation for the unemployed” and teaching them “hobbies” just to amuse themselves.²⁵ Criticism of the arts programs, specifically the Writers’ Project, was particularly strong. As one newspaper stated, instead of shovel leaners the nation would now have pencil leaners, while others complained that during a depression the government should be more concerned with the tangible and useful projects of the CCC and TVA rather than with issues of culture.²⁶ Most of this criticism, however, came from Roosevelt’s conservative opponents who feared he would use his New Deal programs to produce propaganda for the federal government. Many writers and intellectuals across the country, whether on relief or not, supported American politicians putting needy writers to work in their field and enhancing national culture. Literary critics across the country remained the most vocal in their support.

²⁴ Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 12.

²⁵ “\$3,187,000 RELIEF IS SPENT TO TEACH JOBLESS TO PLAY; \$19,658,512 VOTED FOR APRIL: BOON DOGGLES’ MADE,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1935.

²⁶ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 48; Taylor, *American-Made*, 2, 247-48.

Bernard De Voto, who wrote for the *Saturday Review of Literature* and contributed to *Harper's Magazine* in the 1930s, criticized the Writers' Project in its early years. The more he read of the completed guidebooks however, the more he valued the program and became one of the Project's staunchest supporters. In his first review of the state guides, De Voto expressed that the Project vindicated itself and described the material "a patriotic force," one that will "heighten our national self-consciousness, preserve invaluable antiquarian material that might have perished, and facilitate our knowledge of ourselves."²⁷ Others, such as notable literary critic Lewis Mumford and novelist Robert Cantwell also provided many positive reviews, while authors such as John Steinbeck offered their public support of the program. In the hundreds of reviews published, the majority of the critics gave the guidebooks favorable appraisals and generally echoed De Voto's sentiment that it contributed to American patriotism.²⁸ Additionally, the intellectual community advocated both the guidebook and oral history projects.

Although supporters celebrated the Project's material, an appreciation of the material did not translate into an appreciation of the Project itself. In its early days the public generally disapproved of the Project, as most Americans considered it "another New Deal boondoggle."²⁹ Harry Hopkins, director of the WPA and key architect of the arts programs, received the brunt of the negativity. When faced with such criticisms,

²⁷ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 207.

²⁸ The oral histories received considerably less publicity than the guide series. After the Project ended the many manuscripts and interview transcripts were sent to archives across the country and mostly untouched by the public for decades.

²⁹ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 374; Bold, *The WPA Guides*, xiv.

Hopkins merely retorted “Hell! They’ve got to eat just like other people.”³⁰ His extensive background in social work, as well as his experience heading the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) and FERA, provided him with a sympathetic view towards people in need and a special interest in providing jobs that fit human wants and skills.³¹ Hopkins, on the advice of fellow program architect Jacob Baker, appointed his friend and arts program visionary Henry G. Alsberg as national director of the Writers’ Project. Alsberg was a man “fervent about national culture,” while his personality, administrative judgment, history of work for social justice, and unique arts background greatly contributed to the project’s success.³²

As the Project commenced in 1935, Alsberg began selecting state directors to head each state office. Although a national program, each of the then 48 states possessed its own local editorial office led by a state director and team of editorial staff. These offices managed Project direction at the state level by hiring and organizing local staff and implementing project research and composition. Regional offices aided specific regional assignments, such as the interviews with former slaves in the South. Alsberg and his team of national editors in the central office in Washington, D.C., had authority over all fifty state offices – one for each state, two for California, and one for New York City. This office managed the final editing of each state’s work, as well as set standards

³⁰ June Hopkins, *Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 190.

³¹ Penkower, 9.

³² Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 24. Originally from New York City, Alsberg was chosen as national director because of his background in editing two federally-funded magazines, as well as his extensive work in journalism in the U.S. and abroad. He was also at one time an off-Broadway theater director, and attempted to write his own biography but never finished. He was a graduate of Columbia and held a law degree, though he only practiced law for three years, and remained a life-long social activist. Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 53-58.

for formats and procedures. Based upon personal experience or recommendations Alsberg chose a mixed group of state directors. Fourteen directors were women, more than half were journalists and novelists, and the rest were professors of history and English, amateur poets and writers, and others who had previously worked in education or publishing. The state director's first task was to hire experienced, local writers, and set work priorities.³³

The national office insisted that each state needed 100 writers to produce the 250,000-word, 600-page book that was each state Project's first task: the *American Guide Series*. The Writers' Project encountered hiring problems that other Federal One programs did not, however. While the other programs hired workers with defined skill sets and training – the Music Project hired musicians, the Art Project hired artists, and the Theatre Project hired actors – it proved difficult to determine who qualified as a writer, as many who applied had never before written professionally. As a result, the Project took to hiring a multitude of “educated, white-collar professionals who needed work and were willing to declare themselves ‘writers’ if it meant a paycheck.”³⁴ These skilled persons included historians, researchers, architects, archaeologists, map draftsmen, geologists, teachers, librarians, ministers, lawyers, and eventually “almost any other occupation that involved an understanding of the English language and some training and observations in the preparation of records.”³⁵ Most were educated at a higher level and had training in

³³ Taylor, *American-Made*, 296. Although the state directors were supposed to have the freedom to hire and set work priorities free of the national editorial office's interference, WPA politicians in Washington were ultimately able to influence job quotas or demand extra workers. In addition, in numerous instances Alsberg was forced to interfere in state Project's business because of problems with state directors, publication timeliness, and employees.

³⁴ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, ix.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

their fields yet found themselves unemployed and without relief work in their area of expertise. Although representing an array of professions, these white-collar professionals possessed one common skill acquired through their educations – the ability to write.³⁶

The Writers' Project garnered further criticism for its inability to distinguish between “writer” and the various professionals. Even the Authors League of America participated in this criticism early on. Upset by WPA policies specifying that 90 percent of all Project workers must be on relief, as the majority of the best writers were not so much unemployed as underemployed, the League complained that “bona fide writers in need were unable to secure WPA employment,” while many others were simply employed because they were on relief. Additionally, the League provided funds to its indigent members to keep them alive, and the WPA denied employment to people who received aid from any private sources.³⁷

These hiring regulations greatly narrowed the pool of experienced writers on the Project who could train and supervise the other less-experienced workers.³⁸ Since Alsberg could not dismiss complaints on the issue, he publicly announced new provisions that the Project would also be employing “near writers,” “occasional writers,” and “would-be writers,” in addition to established literary figures, such as Conrad Aiken, Nelson Algren, and Jack Conroy. Employment included men and women “who want to

³⁶ Penkower, 14.

³⁷ Jerre Mangione, “When Writers were on the Federal Payroll,” *The American Pen* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 77.

³⁸ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, x.

write, probably can write, but lack the opportunity,” and thus the Project was also used as an opportunity to find new talent and advance the skills of up-and-coming writers.³⁹

To further quiet the public’s disparaging comments about staff composition, Alsberg sent around a questionnaire to every state director in 1938, hoping to obtain information about their personnel. Only 35 of the directors responded, but from these results the Washington, D.C., office determined that a mere 83 of the 1,722 employees responsible for writing material were nationally recognized authors. The results indicated another 1,102 had varying levels of writing backgrounds. Some had previous experience as editors, worked on a newspaper staff or had previously sold articles to newspapers and magazines, while others once worked as scholars, educators or researchers. The survey classified 159 employees as “beginning writers with promise,” while 165 had engaged in minor forms of scholarship. An additional 213 workers remained unclassified.⁴⁰

Although the questionnaire could not determine the composition of personnel in individual states, and it is unknown which states completed the survey altogether, these statistics represent the overall personnel employed by the Project.

As the number of non-writers greatly outnumbered the established authors, the survey did little to silence critics. The Project was able to overcome such adversity and achieve many literary accomplishments despite opposition, and enjoyed a number of favorable literary reviews. The lack of experienced professionals also provided the Writers’ Project with management challenges that the other arts projects did not incur.

³⁹ Mangione, “When Writers Were on the Federal Payroll,” 78.

⁴⁰ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 100. Although 2,317 total employees were polled nationally, the number 1,722 comes from workers that were performing editorial, literary, research, or reportorial work, rather than working as clerks, stenographers, photographers, and map draftsmen.

With the high number of untrained writers, Project administrators had to supervise closely the less experienced writers. Consequently, additional editorial responsibility typically fell to the more experienced editorial staff and the Washington office. Editors often missed their deadlines due to their increased workloads.⁴¹

With the help of a handful of talented local authors, this multitude of professionals with little or no prior writing experience researched and composed travel guides for every state, region, and major city. Written by the American people, a mosaic of workers straight off the breadlines, these guides were the first of their kind. Additionally, workers conducted and transcribed a host of interviews with Americans previously without voice, creating countless records to be used by generations of historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. These “writers” played an integral part in the discovery of America and American culture during the Great Depression, and left thousands of records of significant and enduring value behind. The Great Depression may have been a dark period in American history, but through the despair and hunger a great cultural awakening emerged under the auspice of government-supported work.

This thesis explores and evaluates the Alabama Project in order to enhance the understanding of this 1930s cultural awakening. Chapter One explores the administrative background of the Alabama Project and analyzes *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*. It argues that in writing its guidebook, Project staff searched for the characteristics that made Alabama uniquely “Alabama” and uncovered a diverse state comprised of individuals, communities, and regions with distinct character. In the process, the Project emphasized and celebrated this diversity. The chapter finds that the resulting guide was

⁴¹ Ibid., 512.

the state's first attempt at writing an inclusive history, and remained an important source for future generations.

Chapter Two contends that the Oral History Projects further contributed to the discovery, acknowledgment, and celebration of the state's diverse history by collecting the stories of former slaves and ordinary Alabamians. The chapter traces the backgrounds and origins of the Ex-Slave Narratives, Life Histories, and Folklore Projects, and evaluates the resulting interview transcripts. Arguing that Project staff uncovered their state's diversity by documenting these previously untold stories from underrepresented populations, the chapter concludes that this material made lasting contributions to a new understanding of the state's history and culture.

Chapter Three examines the Alabama Project's legacy over time and how its materials altered the American historical perspective. It demonstrates each program's enduring value through exploring ways in which scholars and the public have used Project materials in the recent past. The chapter tracks the material's neglect after the 1930s, and argues that it resurfaces in the 1970s due to changing trends in historical writing and in the use of documentary evidence. The emergence of a new social history and renewed focus on local and community history in the 1970s facilitated the materials return. The chapter determines that despite the decades of academic and public neglect, the materials ultimately transformed how scholars and the public perceived, studied, and wrote about history.

CHAPTER ONE

Mirror to America: Alabama's Guidebook Project

“Old and new Alabama are merging... The ante bellum mansion and the towering steel mill still symbolize Alabama's dual personality. But the clash of the once conflicting interests of agriculture and industry has lost some of its former bitterness as activities in both fields show the value of cooperation. Fast-changing conditions are, it seems, drawing Alabamians together into a close-knit group, strengthened rather than weakened by their different backgrounds and the different forces that have shaped their lives.”

– “Alabama Old and New,” *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*, 1941

The *American Guide Series* was a collection of state guidebooks that each of the forty-eight states individually researched, wrote, and published. Uniform in format, each state guide consisted of essays on the state's history, a profile and description of every major town and city, and a detailed travel guide down every major road. Additional guidebooks to major cities, places of interest, regions, and territories were also published during the Project's duration. This project culminated with the publication of *The American Guide: A Source Book and Complete Travel Guide for the United States* (1949), a compilation of excerpts from every state's guidebook edited by Writers' Project's national director Henry G. Alsberg. It included essays on the nation's history, government, Native Americans, labor, architecture, art, literature, and music. Divided by region, a broad sketch and description of all eight regions existed as an introduction to the

travel section, and emphasized each state's distinctions and strengths. Lastly, a detailed travel description of every U.S. and state highway was presented, with major points of interest highlighted along the way. As Bernard A. Weisberger commented in his 1985 compilation of selected guidebook essays, the Writers' Project's *American Guide Series* was "probably the best-known of the Project's achievements, and the state guides, by common consent, were its crowning works."⁴²

Hiring local citizens to research and write travel guides for every state remains unprecedented. Although part of the mass relief programs initiated by the New Deal, the Writers' Project placed emphasis on furnishing culture to the nation through the *American Guide Series*. The guidebooks discovered America, introduced the country to its citizens, and made culture accessible to the public.⁴³ Ultimately, the Writers' Project gave the nation a lasting and useful piece of work in addition to providing thousands of jobs to unemployed writers, researchers, editors, and other professionals during the Great Depression. The guidebooks were not only travel manuals, but representations of the America that existed in the 1930s through documenting each state's people, cultures, and traditions. Heralded as "the finest contribution to American patriotism that has been made in our generation," the guidebooks allowed, for the first time in the nation's history, "to hold the mirror up to all America."⁴⁴

Although each state maintained localized editorial offices, the national office supplied each state director with identical instructional manuals detailing the appropriate

⁴² Bernard A. Weinberger, ed., introduction to *The WPA Guide to America: The Best of 1930s America as Seen by the Federal Writers' Project* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), xii.

⁴³ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 42.

⁴⁴ "Mirror to America," *Time Magazine*, January 3, 1938; see also R.L. Duffus, "Uncle Sam Plays a Baedeker Role," *New York Times*, January 10, 1937.

procedures for completing the guidebook. Due to the shared approaches, procedures, values, and format dictated by the national office, the guidebook series collectively stands as a cohesive anthology of the United States. However, as material was collected locally, by workers most familiar with their state's distinct characteristics, each guide represented its own state's true spirit, making each state guide individualistic.

The guidebook project represents the Federal Writer's Project's larger goals of discovering and documenting the history and culture of each state, and the Alabama guidebook is a significant example of this effort. This chapter examines *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South* to elucidate how the guidebook exemplified these overarching goals, as its writers created a historical and cultural portrait of the state. To understand the implications of the guidebook endeavor and how they achieved this portrait, this chapter reviews the origins of the guidebook concept, traces the administrative issues encountered by the Alabama Project, and evaluates the guidebook itself. The chapter argues that not only did Alabama effectively write its own history at a local and community level, but did so by highlighting and celebrating the state's cultural diversity. It contends that in researching and writing the guidebook, staff searched for the distinct characteristics that made Alabama uniquely "Alabama" and discovered a diverse state, a state comprised of individuals, communities, and regions all with distinct character. It concludes that the guidebook recognized and celebrated this diversity through text and photographs, and emphasized the importance of these groups to Alabama's history. Furthermore, it praised these groups as contributors to a common Alabama culture, equal in importance to the white, wealthy landowners that scholars and the public most often associated with the history of the state. Through their writings, Project staff provided

these underrepresented groups with an outlet to share their own stories, portraying them not as passive beings controlled by the dominant elite, but as active agents with their own contributions to state culture and history independent of the traditional sources of power and historical memory in Alabama. For the first time, these lesser-known actors shared history's stage equally with the popular "great white elite" in the state.

In its nascent days, the Federal Writers' Project's scrambled to determine its first undertaking. Possible ventures included creative literary work, gathering folklore, writing books on topics such as history, sociology, economics and politics, or producing government manuals and reports. The government gave up first on allowing its writers to produce fictional prose such as short stories, novels, plays, and poetry. A lack of available facilities and government funds for publication contributed to casting the idea aside, and as writers were well aware, their work did little good until published. Outside sponsorship would have to be found, and many sponsors were unwilling to support creative endeavors as they were uncertain sales would succeed in reimbursing their investments. Additionally, any manuscript produced on Project time became government property, and if outside sponsorship did occur, writers feared they might forfeit profits to the government from a possible best-seller in trade for a meager relief wage.⁴⁵ Finally, Project staff found many risks in giving their writers creative flexibility for fear they would produce subversive content embarrassing the administration.⁴⁶ As for the production of government manuals and reports, even WPA administrators thought this

⁴⁵ Henry G. Alsberg, foreword to *American Stuff*, by the Federal Writers' Project (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), v-vii.

⁴⁶ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 42. The intellectual climate was heavily charged with Marxist ideology in the country throughout the 1930s, which provided for a growing fear of communist activity in the Arts Projects of the WPA.

bureaucratic work would “only add to the depression of the writers and the nation.”⁴⁷

Nonfiction works of a social, economic, industrial, historical, and political nature were given extensive consideration, but the administration remained unsure how to administer and manage such projects. In addition, WPA officials needed a project that could encompass every U.S. state to provide fair employment to writers across the nation.

While the other three arts programs presented their creativity and productions in more standard ways, the Writers’ Project had a more difficult time connecting with the public. Musicians in the Music Project reached their audiences through a variety of media, including symphony orchestras, string quartets, choruses, bands, and musical dramas. Actors appeared in plays that were intelligently chosen and produced by the Theatre Project, and artists in the Art Project created and displayed some of the finest contemporary American art through murals and exhibitions.⁴⁸ However, given the nature of writing and the problems the Writers’ Project encountered with publishing material, writers were unable to present their works to the public in similar formats. In addition, the Writers’ Project employed a more varied group of professionals than the other programs, and even though there was sufficient first-rate talent, it was difficult to define those individuals who deserved to be published. Seeking to move away from the creative aspect, the Project focused on utilitarian work that would benefit the entire nation. This proved difficult however. The decision for the Writers’ Project’s first major undertaking lay in the government’s willingness to sponsor a publishing venture that would provide

⁴⁷ Ibid. Other key ventures such as the Oral History and Folklore projects were implemented later in the Project’s life. In addition, some government manuals and reports were produced, but only as work concluded on the guidebooks and only in several states. Some creative works were also eventually published, though in very low numbers, as they acted as side ventures for a select few writers.

⁴⁸ Alsberg, foreword to *American Stuff*, v.

utilitarian work encompassing every state, prove capable of involving all types of professionals, and whose product would be nationalistic in nature.⁴⁹

The manner in which the Writers' Project decided upon the guidebooks reflected a nationalistic sentiment common throughout the Great Depression, as administrators saw it as a means to instill patriotism. Administrators wanted to generate a product that would be of social use to the nation, one that could be "a directory and guide to the historical and contemporary development of this country," as well as one that would make a "valuable contribution...to American culture" and life.⁵⁰ As a result of the Depression, Americans questioned their country's character, and administrators felt the arts projects provided a potential solution to these identity issues. Although culture was not a new concept during the 1930s, it was arguably only just becoming a widespread idea, as the term in its modern sense was cultivated and domesticated. As culture was previously perceived as men's intellectual and artistic knowledge, the 1930s saw a shift in reference to "all the things that a group of people inhabiting a common geographical area do, the ways they do things and the ways they think about things, their material tools and their values and symbols."⁵¹ The Writers' Project sought to discover and document the culture that was uniquely American through their projects, including highlighting the nation's many distinct regional cultures. They required a well-suited project, one that would fit this desire to discover aspects of American identity, work under the constraints inherent to the nature of the Writers' Project, and encompass every state in the union.

⁴⁹ Ibid., v-vi.

⁵⁰ Alsberg, quoted in Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 53.

⁵¹ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 153-154.

After much debate, the administration came up with a project that fit the given conditions: guidebooks for every state, region, and major city. The guides would be filled with historic and cultural essays, encyclopedic information, and maps of every major roadway. This project, at the height of the Great Depression, met the definition of “socially useful.”⁵²

Ultimately Project administrators wanted to present to all Americans a “broad cultural picture of the American scene, past and present,” which would describe America’s folkways, waterways, social, political, and industrial economy, as well as her unique scenic and historic features.⁵³ Project administrators were not looking to write theoretical books about America and American culture, but rather to affirm America’s true identity by discovering the physical and cultural aspects of America’s landscape, and offering them for public consumption. The need to discover a national identity in Depression-era America is what Warren Susman described as the “complex effort to seek and to define America as a culture and to create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding” during a time of a deep national loss of confidence.⁵⁴ The project also suited the three ideals of relief work that WPA director Harry Hopkins used for cost justification – to save morale, preserve human skills and talents, and add material enrichment to American national wealth through the labors of the unemployed.⁵⁵ Thus,

⁵² Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 19.

⁵³ Alsberg, foreword to *American Stuff*, v-vi.

⁵⁴ Susman, 157.

⁵⁵ Harry Hopkins, March 14, 1936, quoted in Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 51.

after meeting every stipulation, work began on the *American Guide Series*, "one of the noblest and most absurd undertakings ever attempted by any state."⁵⁶

Katharine Kellock first approached Henry Alsberg, National Director of the Writers' Project, with the idea of guidebooks, and she remained a leading architect of the project. Kellock had an education background in journalism, American history, and the social sciences, as well as various professional experiences in social work. Leaving her position with the Resettlement Administration, she embarked on the Project with great fervor. A frequent traveler, she was a proponent of guide literature, even for the fireside traveler. Having spent time traveling Europe, Kellock was an enthusiastic advocate of the Baedeker guides.⁵⁷ Named for its German-born founder Karl Baedeker, the extensive Baedeker guidebooks followed a strict format: beginning with a lengthy section of introductory information about the country, the remainder of the guide contained detailed and descriptive travel data and illustrated maps. These Baedeker travel guides, Kellock argued, could serve as a foundation for the *American Guide Series*.⁵⁸

The Baedeker concept had in fact been applied to American travel before the Project's undertaking. Englishman Findlay Muirhead wrote a comprehensive guide to the United States following the Baedeker form, originally published in 1893 and revised in 1909. *United States*, however, was obsolete and out of print by the time Alsberg's team set to work on America's new set of guides. In addition, the old guidebook carried

⁵⁶ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 51. References a quote used by poet W.H. Auden. Auden described the Arts Project as noble because "no other state has ever cared whether its artists as a group lived or died.... Yet absurd, because a state can only function bureaucratically and impersonally."

⁵⁷ Christine Bold, "The View from the Road: Katharine Kellock's New Deal Guidebooks," *American Studies* 29, no. 2 (Fall 1988), 7-8; Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 46, 63-65.

⁵⁸ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 46.

a strong sense of authorship by an outsider describing a foreign country, and overall the writing was dry and purely factual.⁵⁹ Alsberg and his team looked to erase this feeling of European cultural imperialism and provide a volume that described America by Americans. In this effort, the administration hoped that a discovery of American culture would take place, and that a renewal of American literature would come with it.⁶⁰ Literature during this period – along with music, art, and film – was becoming increasingly nationalistic, with emphasis often placed in defining American life past and present. The Project effectively contributed to and strengthened this trend in American literature through its activities.⁶¹ Therefore the guidebooks served many purposes: in addition to discovering American culture, they were to contribute to the “reintegration of the American artist into the community,” renew interest in American literature, and stimulate national pride.⁶²

It would be the Federal Writers’ Project’s principal triumph – a guidebook published for every state, and written by residents of every state. Although serving a functional purpose, the patriotic nature of creating “an inclusive portrait of America,” one that discovered, acknowledged, and celebrated the nation’s cultural pluralism, was unprecedented. The endeavor would be inclusive rather than exclusive, illustrating America’s democratic principles.⁶³ The guidebooks were designed to represent all Americans, including those who were without prior agency whether due to social or

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 6; Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 26.

⁶¹ Susman, 157.

⁶² Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 6; Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 26.

⁶³ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 6.

economic status, ethnic background, or gender. The Project's national office worked to make this happen by creating specialized editorial positions that covered specific areas. For example, Sterling Brown served as national Negro affairs editor and supervised the representation of African Americans, D'Arcy McNickle from the Bureau of Indian Affairs directed the inclusion of American Indians, Morton W. Royse managed the social-ethnic studies, and Jerre Mangione managed the representation of other ethnic populations, to name a few. Through editing privileges, these individuals supervised the language and content that the state offices produced, and assisted in changes that would better illustrate a more heterogeneous American culture.⁶⁴ Sterling Brown's work was particularly important in Southern states like Alabama, as historians wrote in ways that romanticized the antebellum South. These historical accounts perpetuated a history largely defined by the subordination of African Americans. Brown struggled to ensure that state directors represented African Americans appropriately.⁶⁵ Although Brown and Alabama's director Myrtle Miles clashed on this issue, Brown significantly impacted the treatment of African Americans in the Alabama guidebook. Ultimately Miles implemented Brown's suggestions, and the final product represented this effort as it greatly portrays a heterogeneous Alabama.

Although in the midst of a national depression, the guidebooks came at an opportune time in American history. The 1930s marked the cusp of the age of tourism, which surged following World War II. Although the economy was weak, travel and tourism did experience a small growth in the Depression and New Deal years.

⁶⁴ Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 27-28.

⁶⁵ John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A. Sanders, *Sterling A. Brown's A Negro Looks at the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113.

Americans spent over \$14 million in 1929 and, despite the depression, spending continued to rise with a reported \$1.331 million in 1935. Although car sales did not rise, gas expenditures increased and camp sites proliferated. By the middle of the 1930s, vacation travel accounted for well over half of what was spent in recreation; eighty-five percent of which was done by car. Travel was clearly a growing market, and the government found enough potential in it that in 1935 the Senate held hearings on a bill that would “encourage travel to and within the United States.” This bill led to the creation of the U.S. Travel Bureau.⁶⁶ In addition, work done by the WPA and CCC, including highway projects and work in parks and other landscapes, made travel more comfortable.

Travel was also different in the 1930s. It was a time before superhighways, and automobile travelers took secondary roads through rural regions, small towns, and unique landscapes. Life generally moved more slowly and people took pleasure in the process of travel itself, stopping along the way to talk to strangers in local businesses.⁶⁷ The guidebooks encouraged this lifestyle, as they thoroughly described every road and place of interest. From the big cities to small villages, and from urban tourist spots to lonely sections of rural highway, the guidebooks carefully examined every mile, providing the most comprehensive travel guide American motor tourists ever witnessed.⁶⁸ The guidebooks were widely disseminated to the public for use along these roads. From bookstores to libraries, and transportation depots to hotels, state guides were prominently

⁶⁶ Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 6; Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1979), 142-143.

⁶⁷ Weisberger, ed., introduction to *The WPA Guide to America*, xv.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

exhibited for the public's utility and enjoyment. Guidebook essays were circulated to the public even prior to their publication through newspapers and radio stations.⁶⁹

For consistency amongst the guides, each state was directed to follow a specific formula imposed by the national office. This standard format was a compromise between two different schools of thought. While some Project staff wanted the guidebooks to act as interpretive studies of the states, which would be useful to researchers and teachers, others wanted them to act as literal guidebooks and full of practical information for travelers.⁷⁰ The compromise agreed upon by Alsberg and his team was a three-section guidebook: short essays, city sketches, and road tours. The first two sections satisfied research and teaching uses, while the last remained a practical travel guide. The essay section covered a wide array of topics, including the state's natural and political history, economy, social life, folklore, arts, and recreation. The second section described the state's most important cities and towns, accompanied by maps detailing points of interest. The third provided an in-depth road tour across the state's principal highways – from north to south and east to west – noting every town, village, crossroad, and location of interest along the way.

In addition to a uniform format, Alsberg and his team determined that all aspects of the writing process would be standardized as well. At the project's onset, Alsberg issued a series of eighteen manuals to each state office, which "dictated collection practices, filing systems, the flow of copy through the editorial office, textual organization, and style." Alsberg intended to standardize the process as well as the

⁶⁹ Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 12.

⁷⁰ Weisberger, ed., introduction to *The WPA Guide to America*, xiii.

product, providing a sense of national unity throughout the country and between the various states, hence creating a sense of “one America.”⁷¹

Each state guide was not only standard and uniform in style but also in language. The national office requested that local writers produce a vivid picture of their state’s points of interest, but without being too overzealous in their use of adjectives.

Washington editors wanted “to show, not to assert” an accurate portrait of each state and region to the outside traveler.⁷² In addition, the editors wanted to demonstrate that despite the reality of the broken economy, each document could provide the nation with a cheerful, reflective, exuberant, colorful, lyrical, and provocative tone to their native culture, as well as avoid sounding like an “academic lecturer or a bored employee of a tourist attraction.”⁷³ Furthermore, although deeply rooted in the government as a federal relief project, administrators generally avoided political language as they feared New Deal opponents would accuse the arts programs of using their projects as propaganda. Even the guidebook’s connection to the New Deal and to work relief was downplayed in the volumes as well as in press releases and other publicity.⁷⁴

With each individual state volume responsible for the same approach, method, and set of values directed by national officials, demands that made format and language indistinguishable from one state to another, individual state guidebooks can be treated as

⁷¹ Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 30.

⁷² Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 57-58.

⁷³ Weisberger, ed., introduction to *The WPA Guide to America*, xii.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xiv; Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 6.

a piece of the larger national effort.⁷⁵ What made each guidebook astonishingly individual, however, was the Project's method of gathering material, which was collected locally by workers native to the location.⁷⁶ With this combination and cooperation between national order and tone and the content of the local community, each book presented the various provincial colors and sentiments that were unique to every area. As officials told their writers, "anything of interest that is peculiar to the community or its region should be treated more fully."⁷⁷ Individual state guidebooks can therefore be explored to understand the process further and to evaluate their success on this issue.

Alabama's guidebook, for example, is a fair representative of the larger guidebook undertaking. Although researched and composed according to national standards, it was a piece of local literature written by authors most familiar with its places, people, and history. In addition, although informative, its tone lacked the tedious character of the academic lecturer common in the original Baedeker. Instead, its tone was exuberant and cheerful. To accomplish this, writers used a conversational style and the resulting pages read as a piece of prose one would read for enjoyment. This style allowed the tourist to become comfortably immersed in the book. To encourage morale, it also avoided discussion of America's economic plight of the 1930s and depicted a state defeating the Great Depression. Furthermore, it illustrated Alabama as a progressive and industrial state that believed "its industrial expansion will continue," and ignored mention

⁷⁵ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 58. Idaho's guidebook is the only exception. Idaho's state director Vardis Fisher overtook the project and wrote the guidebook nearly completely on his own. Although it was the first guidebook to see publication, it was also the only guidebook that did not follow Washington's format but rather Fisher's, and the central office could do nothing to stop him. Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 354.

⁷⁶ Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 33.

⁷⁷ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 58; Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 30.

of the unemployment epidemic altogether.⁷⁸ At the same time, the guide's essays succeeded in documenting both the positive and negative aspects of Alabama's past. For example, the historic essay "Alabama Old and New" discussed both the burden and benefits of industrial growth. Additionally, rather than omitting sensitive topics, the guide addressed contentious issues such as race relations and Native American removal from Alabama territories. For instance, the book openly discussed Jim Crow laws and slavery throughout. Additionally, an essay entitled "First Americans" is dedicated to Alabama's Native American history, and included phrases such as "exploit the Indians," "Squatters by the hundreds took over Indian lands, defying the owners to dispossess them," and "Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the Government's treaties and protect the Indians from white aggression."⁷⁹

Although local newspapers boasted that state director Myrtle Miles was one of the earliest Project directors to hire a workforce, Alabama was one of the last states to finish its guide, not publishing it until 1941.⁸⁰ Due to several administrative hardships, the guidebook came dangerously close to never being finished. A major contributing factor was an ongoing dispute between Miles and Marie Bankhead Owen, Director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History. Although Miles was described as "a most

⁷⁸ Alabama Writers' Project, *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1941), 69.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-39.

⁸⁰ Press Release, "First copy for the American Guide written by ex Honduran brigadier-general," (November 26, 1935), Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History. This press release boasts that the first *American Guide Series* article sent to the Washington office was written by Alabama writer Achmed H. Mundo.

capable person” and “one of the state’s most intellectual women,”⁸¹ she was reportedly difficult to work with and many felt she lacked the skills necessary for the position of Director. Miles first ran into problems with Owen early on, as she served on the State Advisory Committee for the Project. Upon receiving the first draft of the Alabama guide to review, Owen promptly wrote Miles a letter pointing out all the historical errors in the manuscript and further criticized her and her staff. From that point forward Owen and Miles were at odds with each other, which continued until Miles stepped down as director in 1940.⁸²

With tensions high throughout the Alabama Project, disgruntled employee Alexander B. Johnson further worsened the situation when, in 1937, he corresponded with Owen complaining about Miles. By midsummer, Johnson circulated a petition to have Miles removed from her position.⁸³ During this time, the Alabama Project was in the midst of a campaign for state endorsement and financial support. Armed with Johnson’s complaint, Owen went to Governor Bibb Graves, who agreed that the state would not take part in funding the Project under such conditions. Owen continued her campaign against Miles by publicizing her views through a letter to the local newspaper. Public support for Miles and the Project declined even further, threatening the Project’s state funding. The Washington office intervened in the matter however, and against all odds Miles continued as Director.

⁸¹ Press Release to Edna Kronan of the Birmingham News (January 14, 1936), Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁸² Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, xvii.

⁸³ Correspondence between Alexander B. Johnson and Marie Bankhead Owen, Correspondence File, Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Public disapproval declined, however conditions in Miles' office did not necessarily improve. Employees were still unhappy with her personnel policies and general management, even though a year passed before Miles faced further criticism. This time it was from William T. Couch, regional director of the Federal Writers' Project, following a review of Alabama's guidebook manuscript and general progress.⁸⁴ Upon his assessment to determine the source of the problem, Couch concluded that it was not trouble with Miles' personnel policies or her ability to supervise as previously thought. He found her to be "a charming person, [with] good managerial ability," as well as "careful, conscientious and intelligent." The problem instead was in her ability to write and edit and, in Couch's opinion, Miles "knew nothing" about either one.⁸⁵

Couch responded to this discovery by sending two editors to aid Miles by working full-time on the Alabama guidebook. These editors reorganized the staff, attempted to hire more qualified writers, and provided future advice and ideas to Miles. Shortly thereafter Miles obtained state sponsorship from the Alabama State Planning Commission,⁸⁶ and her relationship with Owen improved. As state archivist, Owen offered to write several articles for the guidebook. Miles graciously accepted this offer, and Owen began to take an active part in the Project again. Still, Miles resigned from her position in 1940, presumably for personal reasons, and William H. Bunce, an Alabama

⁸⁴ With an office in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Couch supervised Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

⁸⁵ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, xviii. Ex-newspaper staff such as Miles typically had a more difficult time composing and editing their work according to Washington's standards. Trained to deal with the immediate present, they lacked the historical perspective needed for the guidebooks. Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 149.

⁸⁶ In 1939 the WPA Relief Bill was cut drastically, resulting from the fight coming from Martin Dies and his Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities. Dies referred to the Federal One projects as a "hotbed" for communist activity. Subsequently the Theater Project was cut completely, while the Writers', Music, and Arts Projects were able to continue only with sponsorship and financial support from each state.

writer who had published numerous children's books, took over as Director until the guidebook was published.⁸⁷

In addition to these internal struggles between editorial offices, the Alabama Project faced adversity in the hiring process, a hardship every state encountered to some degree. Miles's first task as state director was to find qualified writers to aid in the writing, supervising, and editing of Alabama's guide. Despite newspapers' claims that she gathered a workforce quickly, this proved to be "a difficult task given the fact that most good writers in the South already had jobs."⁸⁸ The majority of these writers were not so much unemployed as underemployed, as they produced and submitted works for publication yet remained unpaid until their work was sold. Although they were not guaranteed a steady wage, this made them ineligible to receive federal relief, and the government specified that ninety percent of all Project workers must be on relief. Retaining experienced writers in Alabama proved nearly as difficult as finding them. Relief wages remained around seventy dollars a month, and if a better opportunity arose, writers would seize it.⁸⁹

Although the complete character of the Alabama Project's personnel is unknown, Miles recruited several prominent writers and newspapermen at the Project's onset. In addition to these writers the Project hired numerous others with little to no experience.

⁸⁷ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, xx. Miles's mother was advanced in age at this point, and very ill. It is speculated that Miles quit the Project to care for her. Brown, ed., *Up Before Daylight*, 9.

⁸⁸ "Magazine Tells of How Marie Bankhead Owen Almost Killed the WPA Guide to Alabama," *The University of Alabama News*, May 11, 2000, accessed at <http://uanews.ua.edu/2000/05/magazine-tells-of-how-marie-bankhead-owen-almost-killed-the-wpa-guide-to-alabama>; Press Release, "First copy for the American Guide written by ex Honduran brigadier-general," (November 26, 1935), Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁸⁹ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, xiii.

Utilizing her journalism background to make contacts in the state, Miles's first true writing recruit was Achmed H. Mundo, a newspaperman with experience in both Mexico City and New Orleans. A socialist activist and ex-Honduran Brigadier General, Mundo was identified as a famous local writer.⁹⁰ From the beginning of his employment however, he raised concerns. Described as talented but eccentric, his odd character and demeanor evidently added more to the Project's office atmosphere than did his ability to write.⁹¹ Regardless of his eccentricities, Mundo earned praise at the national level for writing and submitting the guidebook's first article, sent to the Washington office in November of 1935.⁹²

By March 1936, an additional ninety Alabama relief employees joined Miles's team, representing most of Alabama's counties.⁹³ One such early writer was Covington Hall, a distinguished writer in the Deep South who had been writing for twenty-five years and had experience as a journalist, poet, professor, and novelist. A socialist, activist, and radical, Hall was not an Alabama native but was living in northeast Alabama in the mid-1930s when Miles sought him out for employment. Although his tenure on the Alabama Project was short, possibly due to his radical leftist views, he contributed to the Project by working on the editorial staff, conducting life history interviews, and writing short

⁹⁰ Press Release, "First copy for the American Guide written by ex-Honduran brigadier-general," (November 26, 1935), Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁹¹ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, xiii.

⁹² Press Release, "First copy for the American Guide written by ex-Honduran brigadier-general," (November 26, 1935), Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁹³ Press Release (Undated), Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

stories.⁹⁴ The number of employees continued to ebb and flow between 1935 and 1941, employing roughly 160 Alabamians in total. Of these employees, roughly twenty were on the editorial staff, while the rest worked as field workers, researchers, and writers.

The relationship between Alabama's and Washington's editorial office also proved problematic, creating further challenges for the guidebook's completion. Although all research and writing was done by Alabama staff, the national editors wielded final editing control and supervised the language and content. This often led to disputes between the central and local offices, as state directors felt that administrative pressures forced their pens and took away their editorial command. The central offices most often controlled the language and content when portraying African Americans, particularly in Southern guidebooks. Although Miles was sensitive to the inclusion of various races, as a white Alabamian in the Jim Crow South she was often more eager to accommodate a southern white readership.⁹⁵ Sterling Brown, national Negro affairs editor in Washington, often stepped in when Miles failed to give proper treatment to African Americans in Alabama's guidebook. One such example occurred when Miles failed to detail the significance of Booker T. Washington. When approached by Brown, Miles argued that Washington was not native to Alabama and therefore should not be given special treatment just because he was a national figure. As Brown attempted to provide useful comments and material to Miles, however, insisting Alabama needed to produce a more representative guidebook, Miles resisted. Brown viewed her objection to

⁹⁴ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, xiii-xiv; "WPA Alabama Writer' Project," Digital Collections, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁹⁵ Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 103.

the material as an “indication of her prejudicial attitudes against...Blacks in Alabama’s population.”⁹⁶ Brown succeeded in gaining suitable representation of African Americans in the guide; however, the mention of Booker T. Washington remained slight, as he is discussed only in terms of the progression of African American education and Tuskegee University.

Although Brown contended that Miles’s objections were based on prejudice, Miles insisted it was because she did not want to draw unnecessary attention to African Americans. She feared too much inclusion would overbalance the representation of the “foreign populations,” or that the material would seem fantastic or offensive to some Alabama readers. Furthermore, Miles argued that Brown was biased in his facts. Despite her initial exclusion of Booker T. Washington, Miles stressed the importance of including material on other “outstanding” African Americans, such as Congressmen Oscar DePriest and Arthur W. Mitchell, and athletes Jesse Owens and Joe Louis. These men, unlike Booker T. Washington, were Alabama-born. The disputes between Miles and Brown were perhaps more telling of Miles’s general disdain for Washington’s interventions than of prejudice. Miles often defended local interests against the central office, maintaining that “Alabamians understand the Alabama Negro and the general Negro situation in Alabama better than a critic whose life has been spent in another section of the country, however studious, however learn, he may be.”⁹⁷

Despite these various setbacks, the final copy of the Alabama guidebook was published in 1941. The edition was a 442-page volume of essays on Alabama’s history

⁹⁶ Joanne V. Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 74.

⁹⁷ Sklaroff, 103.

and facts about the state, a detailed description of its major cities, and fifteen road tours across the state.⁹⁸ In keeping with the Project's goal of discovering America and representing all cultures, the Alabama guide presented essays on the life, history and culture of the state. It acknowledged diverse cultural influences, especially in areas such as folklore. It also included many photos depicting scenes of everyday life, industry, culture, and prominent landmarks.

The guide followed the format designated by Alsberg's national team, with "Part I: Past and Present" containing essays on Alabama's topography, the history of the state prior to and after statehood, its current industry, commerce and labor, its agriculture, transportation, education, religion, newspapers and radio, sports and recreation, folklore and folkways, literature, music, arts and crafts, and architecture. "Part II: Courthouse Squares," gave a sketch of ten major cities, laid out the city's facts and histories, important points of interest, and included a map of these points. "Part III: Tours," the longest of the three sections, provided detailed road guides through Alabama.

The strength of Alabama's guidebook was its portrayal of state peculiarities and local colors, which were illustrated through its many pages of historic essays, informative sections, and city sketches. This local color was what made the guidebook distinctively "Alabamian." By including numerous historical facts and anecdotes and attaching them to physical locations in the area, the administration hoped to provide the state with the "feeling that time and change had happened here, too," and that each Alabamian had a

⁹⁸ Primary cities the Project included: Anniston, Birmingham, Decatur, Florence, Gadsden, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery, Selma, and Tuscaloosa. Although these facts related to Alabama in the 1930s, these facts and other style issues, particularly those involving racial references, were updated and revised in the 1975 edition. In 2000, however, when published under a new name the University of Alabama Press decided to re-issue it in its original form.

history worth reading.⁹⁹ By demonstrating to readers that Alabama had history, culture, and traditions, Project administrators celebrated and cultivated a sense of Alabama identity. Readers learned about and experienced their cultural past, as the guide approached and infused the landscape with emotional and symbolic content. Providing Alabamians with a consciousness and appreciation of self and state, this local identity brought a sense of belonging, and supplied the larger national identity and culture with local roots. Through individual states such as Alabama, Federal Writers' Project administrators felt they could discover and redefine what it meant to be American.¹⁰⁰

Coupled with numerous essays detailing Alabama's unique historic and cultural background is practical information for tourists and local citizens alike. This included general information about Alabama travel accommodations, including the railroads, bus lines, highways, airlines, and steamship lines that ran through the state, as well as hotels. Additional information included listings for local recreational areas, and state fishing, hunting, and motor vehicle laws and fees. Furthermore, the guide presented miscellaneous state information such as the climate, poisonous snakes and plants, drinking water condition. The guide also included a complete list of city population figures from the 1940 census. A Calendar of Annual Events, which is a record of community events and festivals in 1930s Alabama, followed the demographic statistics. The calendar included such events as the annual flower show, Confederate Memorial Day, band concerts, Peanut Festival, County Fairs, and the State Fair, all of which were uniquely Alabamian. This practical information was valuable for tourists and

⁹⁹ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 58.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

demonstrated the Project's desire to create a utilitarian product, in addition to discovering local culture and history.

The most useful demonstration of a utilitarian product, however, remained the road tours. This section included a 148-page detailed description of all the major roads across Alabama. Mapped out from town to town, they described precisely what the reader might see as they traveled. Divided into nineteen different tours, most of Alabama's major cities and many smaller ones were covered in these suggested routes, and their areas of attraction identified. Between the collection of practical information, such as hotel and campground accommodations and road conditions along the way, many historical and architectural structures and landscapes are identified. For instance, "Tour 1A" extending from Decatur to Jasper, recognized every minor house and landscape that "the route climbs past," including farmers with houses that were "usually two- or three-room structures built of logs or rough lumber." In the same paragraph writers described the rock quarries and "dense growth of oak, hickory, pine, and dogwood" along the way.¹⁰¹

In the book's preface, the Alabama Project recognized that although fiction writers have often utilized Alabama's folkways and attributes of the state's cultural and physical landscape as a backdrop in their writings, Alabama remained unfamiliar to vacation-bound tourists. In addition, Alabamians themselves had experienced far too little about their state's "scenic beauties, history, and development."¹⁰² By focusing its attention on the scenic, historic, and cultural landscapes throughout the tours, the Project

¹⁰¹ Alabama Writers' Project, *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*, 273-276.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, vii.

successfully exhibited tourist spots both popular and obscure. For example, “Tour 1” stretching from the Tennessee Line to Mobile, included Red Mountain and the Statue of Vulcan as a popular tourist spot, while it also included the homes of former governors Luke Pryor and George S. Houston. More interesting, however, is the addition of sites such as Cedar Lake, a “Negro farm community founded...in 1897.”¹⁰³ These tours demonstrated how the Alabama Project wanted the public to view their state, and included a multitude of groups. By moving beyond the “moonlight and magnolias” myths of the Old South, it encountered other cultures and histories of the state. For instance, “Tour 9” extending from the Mississippi border to Mobile, emphasized the Cajun culture found in Citronelle, Alabama. Described as a “suspicious, solitary people” living in isolated communities rarely found on the highways, the guidebook introduced them to travelers and Alabamians as an integral part of the region.¹⁰⁴

The Writers’ Project’s mission was to write guidebooks that discovered and provided the nation with a shared sense of identity. However, administrators also wanted groups and individuals to retain their regional, ethnic, and racial identities.¹⁰⁵ The Alabama guidebook succeeded in this task of presenting a shared “Alabama” by incorporating regional and ethnic differences. The essay on the state’s historical and cultural landscape entitled “Alabama Old and New” demonstrated that the Alabama of the 1930s was an Old South state acclimating to New South ways. However, rather than presenting the typical old-world picture of the Deep South by discussing plantation life,

¹⁰³ Ibid., 253-273.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 366-370.

¹⁰⁵ Hirsch, 38.

Southern belles, mansions, and white Southern nobility, the essay revealed Alabama as a heterogeneous state, filled with diverse regions and people. The essay described the state in six different geographic regions: the Black Belt region, northern urban areas, mountain territory, Wiregrass lands, Cajun country, and the stretch of coast line off of the Gulf. Each territory consisted of distinct peoples, landscapes, industries, attitudes, traditions, and cultures.

Not surprising, the guidebook described the 1930s Black Belt in terms of cotton fields and plantation houses. This section most closely resembled the Old South, and portrayed race relations according to the traditional “white paternalism,” where the African American typically “removes his hat and usually steps aside when a white person passes.”¹⁰⁶ The essay described urban Alabamians from Birmingham as “a new type of Southerner,” as the growing industries altered their ways of life. Contrary to the previous Black Belt section, this section portrayed African Americans as an autonomous group of people, segregating themselves and living independent from the “white paternalism” that existed in the Black Belt.

The essay further described Northeastern Alabama as an area that housed the mountaineers. A group of people positioned at the base of the Appalachians, the essay identified their culture as greatly contrasting that of the cotton lands, while in the southeastern corner the Wiregrass lands accommodated peanut farmers and tended to be a slightly more progressive area than the Black Belt. The Cajuns, who resided in the woods north and west of Mobile Bay, were described as a mixed group of people who keep to themselves and maintained their own cultures and habits. Lastly there was the

¹⁰⁶ Alabama Writers’ Project, *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*, 4.

land along the Gulf coast, particularly the Mobile area, which had a cosmopolitan culture with ports open to citizens of the world. Although these regional profiles often fell into stereotypical descriptions of Alabama's populace, the essay's strength lies in its attempt to break preconceptions of a homogeneous Alabama. The Project could have stayed true to the myths of the Old South and merely discussed this more traditional culture, one with which visitors may be more familiar, but instead they incorporated these many ethnic and cultural differences by highlighting all of Alabama's regions.

The Alabama Project not only provided a literary look at the state, but also included sixty-four pages of photographs on every aspect of Alabama life: from city buildings to one-room shacks, from modern transportation devices to farmers working the land by hand, and from wealthy elite to the poorest labor worker or farmhand. These photographs depicted a sense of pride in Alabama's history and its natural resources and striking architecture. They also fairly depicted the poverty-stricken nature of the Deep South during the Great Depression. In addition, portraits of African American residents as well as white residents filled the pages, only vaguely revealing a sense of difference between these two cultures in the Jim Crow South. The book omitted obvious photographs of segregation; however it presented separate photographs of African American churches and churches for white citizens, as well as African American classrooms and white classrooms.

Project workers consulted numerous sources in order to write the most authentic portrayal of these areas and people as possible. To gather this information, the Alabama Project received aid from local citizens that had "special knowledge or possession of

historical or traditional facts or material.”¹⁰⁷ The book’s integrity, the guidebook’s preface states, “lies in the fact that it is a product of many minds, a mosaic of countless items.”¹⁰⁸ Project administrators invited all Alabama citizens to contribute, opening the research and fact gathering process to those who were not necessarily specialists in the field. Through these public contributions, Project architects helped to democratize Alabama’s history, taking the power away from the traditional bastions of culture and historical memory in the state. With such diverse contributions, Alabama’s history expanded outside the walls of the state archives, museums, and organizations such as the Daughters of the Confederacy, to recognize the contributions of all of Alabama’s citizens. Additionally, by eliciting public help for this research, staff could more aptly document every local community. Alsberg encouraged every state to take advantage of this mass of authentic material, as writers and fieldworkers around the state “visited every spot described, rummaged the record books, and talked long hours with local authorities and plain folk” to understand every area’s unique character.¹⁰⁹

What was truly understated in the Alabama guide was the amount of effort Alabama personnel put into representing African American culture and way of life, despite Miles’s resistance to editorial suggestions. The guidebook included African Americans not simply as an addendum to Alabama culture, but as a group that “shares center stage with the culture of other groups around the state” by positioning them in the

¹⁰⁷ Press Release, Untitled, (November, 3 1935), Alabama Writers’ Project General Information, Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

¹⁰⁸ Alabama Writers’ Project, *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*, vii.

¹⁰⁹ Weisberger, ed., introduction to *The WPA Guide to America*, xii.

larger framework of state identity.¹¹⁰ This addition of African American characters in a historical text, particularly as playing an active role in their state's history, was unprecedented in Alabama. Prior historical studies neither recognized nor praised the state's diversity, of which the guide did both.

While the majority of the guide illustrated staff's efforts to include the assortment of cultures found in Alabama, the volume was also a product of its time and circumstances. Although not always explicitly stated, the guidebook's language reflected Southern laws of segregation, and employed terminology deeply rooted in the Southern past. Referring to the Civil War as the "War Between the States" gave the reader a sense that the Lost Cause was still extraordinarily prevalent in the 1930s, while phrases like "both white and Negro citizens" suggests racism by today's standards. Furthermore, the guide occasionally illustrated African American dependence on Alabama's white citizenry, affirming a sense of proper social conduct towards whites in the 1930s. Nonetheless, the guide was a product of its time, as this language was socially accepted and commonly used in Alabama in the early twentieth century.

This chapter's exploration of the Alabama Project and its guidebook highlights the state's accomplishments, despite administrative adversities. The resulting guidebook was Alabama's first attempt at writing an inclusive history, one that included the diverse populations that made Alabama distinctly "Alabama." Written by those who resided within the state and had intimate first-hand knowledge of Alabama, the guide demonstrated to both Alabamians and outsiders that Alabama had a past worth reading.

¹¹⁰ Jackson, ed., introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, xxx.

Although the guidebook had its problems, many of these issues were the byproduct of the time and circumstances in which the Project staff worked, as it demonstrated that the Old South sentiment was ever-present and Alabama was still in the process of acclimating to the New South lifestyle. The publication, therefore, served as a kind of literary time capsule for future generations. Despite such issues, the guide revealed a multitude of Alabama cultures as active participants in Alabama's larger story, and informed these groups that they, too, mattered. The guidebook was the state's first attempt to celebrate its own diversity, and remained an important template for future histories of the state. The guidebook held up a mirror to all of Alabama, and in the process discovered shared values and way of life.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 20.

CHAPTER TWO

In Their Own Words: Alabama's Oral History Projects

“These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power...that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.”

– Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Forgotten Man*, April 7, 1932

In Mark Twain's 1897 essay, “What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us,” the American novelist wrote:

In time [the native novelist] and his brethren will report to you the life and the people of the whole nation—the life of a group...in villages in fifty States and Territories; then the farm-life in fifty States and Villages; a hundred patches of life and groups of people in a dozen widely separated cities.... And when a thousand able novels have been written, there you have the soul of the people, the life of the people, the speech of the people; and not anywhere else can these be had. And the shadings of character, manners, feelings, ambitions, will be infinite.¹

Although Twain never saw his statement realized, during the 1930s the United States embarked upon a similar quest during the Great Depression. The massive undertaking was the Federal Writers' Project's second major endeavor: the Oral History Projects. Designed to document the experiences of the American people and the nation's unique folklore in hope of discovering and redefining what was “American,” these projects proved critical to the preservation and presentation of a “new” American history for

¹ Mark Twain, “What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us,” *How to Tell a Story, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1909), 147.

future generations. Consisting of the Ex-Slave Narrative Project, Life Histories Project, and the Folklore Project, the Writers' Project conducted personal interviews with Americans from all walks of life and documented these personal accounts.

Project administrators chose to interview the remaining living former slaves and “ordinary people,” including many groups of citizens who, whether due to their social or economic status, race, or ethnicity, were previously marginalized and their personal histories largely missing in history books. Described as the “bottom up” approach to history, the Project interviewed underrepresented populations, including tenant farmers, farm owners, factory workers, clerks, miners, lumberjacks, the unemployed, and many others. In addition to these interviews, the Project recorded local traditions – language, expressions, customs, foods, recreations, songs, essays, and stories – of the American people.²

Initiated by administrators to create an inclusive portrait of America, these projects recorded the previously undocumented stories of America so the voices of the American people and their traditions could be heard. As multitudes struggled for survival and affirmation during the Great Depression, the variegated parts of America became further visible. Subsequently the Project sought to document this diversity. The portrait they created discovered, acknowledged, and celebrated the nation's cultural pluralism, and demonstrated America's democratic principles.³ In addition, by documenting these personal stories and regional folklore, the administration hoped the impoverished and oppressed would feel heard by their government and nation, ultimately improving

² Library of Congress, “Folklore Projects,” accessed at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpalife.html>.

³ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 6; Mangione, “When Writers were on the Federal Payroll,” 84.

morale. The overarching ambition to both celebrate and unite a nation, even during such economic hardship, uniquely allowed the Writers' Project to be a vehicle to discover all of America, and provided grounds for national unity by investigating "who and what was American."⁴

To complete this massive undertaking, the Writers' Project systematically formulated a method for obtaining these personal stories. Employees entered communities to administer interviews using a standardized questionnaire, made records of their responses, and later transcribed the stories. Interviewers conducted their oral histories in the same manner in every state. Though the Project recorded Life Histories in all regions of the country, the Ex-Slave Narratives were primarily executed in Southern states such as Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Additional states such as Ohio, Indiana, and Kansas conducted interviews as well, interviewing former slaves who escaped enslavement through the Underground Railroad. Photographs often accompanied these interview transcripts, and together Project staff combined the two into a series of seventeen volumes in thirty-three parts by the Library of Congress in 1939. However, the material remained largely unpublished and the Library deposited the collection in its Rare Books Division in 1942, on account of its potential research value.⁵ In addition to these components, the volumes also contain "interviews with the descendants of slaves and white informants concerning slavery,

⁴ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 17-19.

⁵ John Y. Cole, "Amassing American 'Stuff': The Library of Congress and the Federal Arts Projects of the 1930s," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 40, no. 4 (January 1983): 385.

transcripts of laws, and notices and records of sale, transfer, and manumission of slaves” to complete this anthropological resource of slavery in its entirety.⁶

The Oral History Projects created a substantial “archive of experiences to be used by future generations.” Although today researchers regard the collection of narratives and histories as one of the most valuable links to this lost piece of our past, many scholars did not recognize its full potential as a resource for many years.⁷ Only several volumes of narratives were published during and directly following the Project’s duration. *These Are Our Lives*, a collection of Life Histories, was published in 1939, as well as *The Negro in Virginia*, a collection of Ex-Slave Narratives. In 1940 the Georgia Writers’ Project published *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, and finally Benjamin A. Botkin, national folklore editor during the Project’s tenure, edited a volume of excerpts from the Ex-Slave Narratives in 1945 entitled *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*.⁸

Through interviewing former slaves, ordinary citizens, and gathering folklore, the Oral History Projects met the overarching goals of discovering and documenting the hidden history and culture in America. This chapter explores these projects in Alabama and analyzes the multitude of interview transcripts produced by Alabama Project staff, revealing what these stories said about life in the state. It argues that these projects highlighted and celebrated the state’s diversity by choosing to record important stories of

⁶ Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945), x.

⁷ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, x.

⁸ Although the narratives and histories have been widely used by historians in more recent decades, this material was largely ignored until the 1970s. At that time America saw a widespread shift in the study of history, which moved from discussions of the traditional white elite to representing the larger population, and a renewed interest of this material ensued. This topic will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

slavery and other facets of life in Alabama. By documenting the stories of Alabama's underrepresented populations, staff discovered the previously untold history of the state. Project staff discovered a diverse Alabama full of illuminating stories on slavery, Southern life, and life in Alabama. The interviews revealed how Alabamians lived, their attitudes, and their personal beliefs. These stories created a portrait of the state, and illustrated what made Alabama distinctly "Alabama."

The chapter contends that the Oral History Projects contributed to the discovery, acknowledgment, and celebration of Alabama's diversity, and that the interviews boosted interviewee morale as well as documented important records of life in Alabama. By documenting the experiences of former slaves and ordinary citizens in Alabama, the Alabama Project succeeded in giving voice to the people. To demonstrate the significance of these projects, this chapter discusses the origins of oral history and how the Project used and delineated oral history techniques for future generations; the background of the Ex-Slave Narratives Project and what they tell us of slavery in Alabama; and the foundation of the Life Histories Project and what the interviews tell us about life in Alabama. It concludes that the slave narratives illuminated readers to the daily life of slavery, attitudes and feelings towards being enslaved, and the psychology impact slavery had on Alabama's former slaves. Additionally, by interviewing Alabamians in various occupations and walks of life, the Life Histories provided an honest glimpse into the life of the individual, and revealed themes in Alabama life such as politics, labor, religion, family, education, and basic life experiences across the state. Furthermore, throughout the collection process, these interviews documented a wide range of folklore native to Alabama, contributing to the recording of Alabama's culture.

These projects highlighted and celebrated the state's diversity, and remain an important resource for the study of slavery and life in Alabama.

Oral History

The Federal Writers' Project's Oral History Projects contributed to the establishment, process, and delineation of the modern concept of oral history. Today, practitioners and scholars broadly define oral history as both a discipline and method of research for "[collecting] memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews."⁹ Interviewers conduct oral histories with well-prepared questions in a controlled setting, using an audio or audio-visual recording device. They then transcribe the interviews onto paper, typically summarizing or indexing the recording. In the final step, the interviewer then places the document along with the recording in a library or archival repository.

Oral history practices extend as far back as the founding of civilization. Documenting history through oral tradition and reminiscence is the oldest surviving form of preserving the past and maintaining the traditions and culture of an individual and society. A standard long before the use of written word and the spread of literacy, societies were "ordered and governed by oral tradition." When communities needed historical information they looked to the oral wisdom of their elders.¹⁰

The gathering of eye-witness accounts to use as historic evidence remained a primary tool for historians. The shared processes, methodologies, and standards that oral

⁹ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁰ V.H. Galbraith quoted in Michael T. Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 2nd edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 3.

historians work with in today's Western academic world however, became "relatively unified" in the early twentieth century.¹¹ The Writers' Project's Oral History Projects directly influenced the modern concept of oral history by widely popularizing interview techniques, transcription methodologies, and preservation procedures.

The basic foundation of oral history, the method of interviewing eye-witnesses and using their accounts to write history, originated in the ancient Greek works of Herodotus and Thucydides. In America, practitioners used oral history techniques during the American Revolution. In 1775 Congregationalist Minister William Gordon interviewed participants of the battles of Lexington and Concord, among them Paul Revere, to get a full picture of the events.¹² The interview process and reliance on oral history faded following this period however, and the primary focus shifted towards the use of documentary evidence, as promoted by German historian Leopold von Ranke.

The interviewing process resurfaced again in the 1860s, in a major project conducted by historian and ethnologist Hubert Howe Bancroft. As Bancroft began compiling a comprehensive history of California using the vast collection of books, journals, maps, and manuscripts on western development, he realized that he was missing the living memories of the pioneers of California and the West. Bancroft sent employees to interview diverse populations living in the West and to create their autobiographies to fill in the blanks of history. He eventually placed these "Dictations" in the library at the University of California at Berkeley for research purposes. Bancroft's decision to deposit the interviews in an academic library for historical use marked the first time oral histories

¹¹ Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *Handbook of Oral History* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2006), 19.

¹² Ritchie, 20.

were stored in such a manner. The diverse groups Bancroft interviewed included nineteenth-century Mexican military governors, civilian officials, and the first American settlers.¹³ In addition, in the 1890s the United States Bureau of Ethnography sent researchers into the field to document the songs and stories of Native Americans. Recording their findings using wax cylinders and later depositing them in the Library of Congress, this folklore was also preserved for later generations of researchers.¹⁴

A shift toward the more widespread and popular use of the interview process occurred in the early twentieth century as a result of the proliferation of sociology and cultural consciousness. The American Progressive Era proved influential. The movement, which extended from the end of Reconstruction to World War I, focused on social, economic, and political reforms. These reforms took place in response to an age of violent industrialization and urbanization spurred by the “harsh, unrelenting circumstances of the industrial age” as a means to maintain regard for the democratic tradition. As rapid industrialization contributed to a growing working class, many observers began paying particular attention to this significant segment of society. The era reflected a renewed interest in cultural issues and led social scientists to closely examine the “true forces shaping history” – the working class and ordinary Americans.¹⁵

Understanding these “true forces” of society drove sociologists to discover scientific

¹³ Ibid.; Sharpless, 20. The library, later named for Bancroft, is now home to one of the most well-respected research projects in the oral history field, the Regional Oral History Office, founded in the 1950s. University of California Library, “Regional Oral History Office,” accessed at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/researchprograms/roho.html>.

¹⁴ Ritchie, 21.

¹⁵ Mark T. Gilderhus, *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*, 6th edition (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007), 94-98.

methods to study American society and human nature, including vital interview techniques.

The challenges Americans faced at the turn of the century with rapid modernization were immense and sociologists set out to understand and rationalize the resulting changes, as well as to define “American society.” A relatively new discipline, twentieth-century scholars considered sociology the “science of the laws of history,”¹⁶ and studied the primary motives of human nature: preservative, reproductive, aesthetic, moral, and intellectual factors.¹⁷ Sociology emerged as a recognized profession in America in 1905 with the establishment of the first professional organization in the field, the American Sociological Society. The Writers’ Project’s Life Histories and Ex-Slave Narratives were largely a product of this emerging field, as Project administrators borrowed sociologist’s research techniques.

As a profession interested in human nature and group identity, sociologists adapted scientific techniques to study society and human nature. Although sociologists shared similarities with the more traditional field of anthropology, this rising field studied groups, societies, human interaction, and what binds members of groups and associations, while anthropologists studied the social and physical characteristics of varied cultures. Contrary to anthropology, which typically made observations about communities as an “outsider” by comparing and contrasting various communities in order to seek out the

¹⁶ Dorothy Ross, *Origins of the American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

perspective of the community in an objective way, sociology did not compare groups nor did it have the essential objectivity of an outsider's scrutiny.¹⁸

The general public began recognizing sociology as a profession in the 1920s when practitioners conducted an extensive and groundbreaking study in the community of Muncie, Indiana. Termed the "Middletown studies," it was the first time in America that a group of social scientists made a comprehensive social study of an entire American town. Examining its inhabitants from 1890 to 1935, sociologists used experimental methods which included field research, statistics, surveys, existing documentation, and interviews. Referring to the study as "social anthropology of contemporary life," Robert and Helen Lynd examined group behavior by approaching the community with an outsider's perspective, not unlike an anthropologist, in order to maintain unbiased attitudes in their studies.¹⁹ Like most in the social sciences, they considered this study a contribution to history as well as sociology, given that sociologists tend to examine their subject's origins and development in addition to organization. By presenting "a cross-section of the activities of a community today as projected from the background of yesterday...revealing the Middletown of 1890 as a genesis of the Middletown of today," they hoped to make a historical contribution.²⁰

Sociological studies continued into the 1930s, but the field addressed only a limited group of subjects and typically treated them as abstractions, or statistical information, that described common traits and practices among groups of people but not

¹⁸ Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), vi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vi.

the individual themselves. Developing case studies provided a means of illustrating sociological theories, but typically they were used to describe larger social phenomenon and not individual lives.²¹ This gap in case studies describing individual lives motivated Project staff. Modeling the Oral History Projects after the interview techniques used by sociologists in case studies, it was the goal of Federal Writers' Project administrators to collect case studies of individuals, or oral histories, "purely for the value of accurate portrayals of individual lives."²² The Project drew upon elements of sociology and history and united them with journalistic interview techniques in order to gather life stories from the American people, thus creating a wealth of material for later generations.

The interview techniques and case study structure the Writers' Project borrowed from sociologists proved valuable to subsequent oral histories and influenced the historical community. In 1938 journalist and historian Allan Nevins suggested establishing an organization that would make a "systematic attempt to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans who had led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the last sixty years."²³ Armed with an interest and background in both the popular and academic theory of history, Nevins created the first modern oral history program and archives in 1948 – the

²¹ Joe R. Feagin, Anthony M. Orum, and Gideon Sjoberg, *A Case for the Case Study* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 2.

²² William T. Couch, "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers' Project in the South," July 11, 1938. SG022769 – General Information: Personnel Instructions, Works Progress Administration File, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

²³ Allan Nevins' "Oral History: How and Why It Was Born, The Uses of Oral History" in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, ed. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1948), 27.

Columbia Oral History Research Office.²⁴ Although a proponent of documenting the stories from the “top down” by recording the lives of the social and political elite, contrary to the endeavors of the Writers’ Project’s “bottom up” approach, Nevins’ borrowed the Writers’ Project’s interview processes. Nevins’ projects proved significant to the future of oral history as he helped gain academic support for work of this nature. Using his experience as both an academic and amateur historian Nevins aimed to resolve the conflicts between these two forms of historical practices using his oral history program. Due to his formal training and standing as a professor at Columbia University, Nevins “shared the methods and theories of academic historians,” however he differed with academics on how to “accommodate amateurs within the academic agenda.”²⁵ Nevins cultivated considerable and necessary support within academia for his oral history program, and took steps towards bridging the gap between academic and amateur history.

Briefly returning to documenting history from the “bottom up” in the 1940s, Harvard-educated amateur historian Joseph Gould struck out to conduct oral history interviews with people he called “the short-sleeved multitude.” Noted as a highly eccentric man, he recorded the stories of common people by wandering Manhattan and having conversations with them. Believing that “what people say is history” he hoped to discover a history that was different from what he referred to as “formal history” – the history of kings, leaders, and major events found in textbooks and taught by professors – and rather what regular people had to say about their own lives. Gould wanted to give voice to those with lower class standing for he believed they represented true humanity.

²⁴ Richie, 22.

²⁵ Ian Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 62-63.

As a former staff member of the New York City Project, his venture largely resembled the type of work involved in the Oral Histories Project. He claimed to be compiling a book entitled “An Oral History of Our Time,” but never published the work.²⁶ A 1942 *New Yorker* article by Joseph Mitchell profiled Gould and his research. Although the term oral history had been used earlier to explain a form of oral evidence, it was not until Mitchell’s article that the term attached itself to the interview process in particular.²⁷

The use of oral history continued to spread, and during World War II American military historians extensively relied upon it to gain accounts of the war. Trained historians brought participants together shortly after battle, often in a matter of hours, and generated historical resources by conducting group interviews and then writing studies.²⁸ In addition, historians conducted interviews with Holocaust survivors and transcribed their accounts following European liberation using the same techniques pioneered in the 1930s.

The Writers’ Project’s Ex-Slave Narratives and Life Histories, as well as the subsequent World War II and Holocaust examples, are early models of modern oral history projects. An oral history project is a collection of interviews focused on one specific event, place, or topic, and is completed by interviewing numerous first-hand participants. By asking questions specific to that event, place, or topic, the interviewer

²⁶ Ritchie, 22. Although Gould reported to Mitchell that his project was a vast Oral History that he had begun twenty-six years prior and consisted of 9,000,000 words from more than 20,000 conversations, “An Oral History of Our Time” became a matter of speculation. Mitchell reported that it consisted of only a few notebooks, others recalled reading lengthy sections though found the writing “pedestrian,” while still others recalled seeing Gould with a two-foot thick manuscript being turned away at publishing houses. Joseph Mitchell, “Profiles: Professor Sea Gull,” *The New Yorker*, December 12, 1942, 28-43. Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 178.

²⁷ Ritchie, 22.

²⁸ Sharpless, 21-22.

gains the best possible picture of the area of interest. Furthermore, by using a variety of participants the interviewer creates a record that has a depth and breadth of information, and the voices of not just the powerful or dominant are heard, as is often the case in more traditional historic records.²⁹ By interviewing former slaves the Project successfully created, for the first time, an archive of experience on slavery from the perspective of the enslaved. Additionally, by interviewing average citizens, the Project created a collection of previously untold accounts of life in America. While past oral history endeavors filled in gaps to complete specific historical narratives, the Writers' Project demonstrated that oral history was a legitimate archival resource that could supplement other existing records, such as letters, diaries, and other documents. Furthermore, past oral history endeavors chose interviewees deliberately, while the Writers' Project and subsequent projects selected interviewees arbitrarily, thus providing a more eclectic perspective that often included marginalized groups.

New technological advances simplified the interview process in the 1940s. The invention of the wire recorder allowed historians to easily record the interview and later transcribe it. With this technology the process now moved much faster, eliminating longhand. This new approach allowed historians to transcribe the interview verbatim, removing the literary narratives the Project's interviews possessed. Furthermore, Nevins' public call "for Americans to document and preserve their past through tape-recorded interviews with leaders in society" successfully advanced the notion of oral history in both the academic and civic spheres, allowing it to grow and spread.³⁰ Nevins' first oral

²⁹ Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 2-3.

³⁰ Thomas L. Charlton, "Looking for a Vade Mecum" in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Charlton, Myers

history projects at Columbia were varied and included oil wildcatting, a Book-of-the-Month Club, the Ford Motor Company, and the timber industry.³¹ Similarly, the University of California at Berkeley established their program in 1954 followed by UCLA in 1958. The National Archives and Records Administration implemented its first oral history program in 1960 with a project at the Truman Library in 1960, and thereafter became a standard practice in building presidential library collections.³² The decade continued to see advances in the field, with the availability of the portable cassette recorder invented in 1963 and advances in both professionalization and popularization.

The professionalization of oral history continued with the founding of the Oral History Association in 1967, which established standards and guidelines for the interviewee, interviewer, and sponsoring institution.³³ Oral history thereafter became increasingly popular with both academics and the general public, given its accessibility for local and family historians. An increase in local oral history groups emerged in the 1970s. These organizations connected with the general public and promoted the highest standard in oral history practices by providing workshops and granting research awards.³⁴ By encouraging the general public to participate in this effort to generate and document history, oral history bridged the gap between academic and amateur historian and became the field's first democratic process for documenting history. The term now belongs to citizens everywhere, not just to a group of "bona fide scholars who record memories of

and Sharpless (New York: AltaMira Press, 2006), 3.

³¹ Sharpless, 21-22.

³² Ritchie, 22.

³³ Sharpless, 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

participants from selected historical events or to the trained archivists who administer tapes and transcripts and intellectual property agreements.” Practitioners used the expression ubiquitously and considered it an “essential part of people’s histories,” due in part to having an “enhanced, generalized research and public programming value.”³⁵ Oral history proved essential in the movement towards amateur history envisioned by Nevins.

This spread of amateur history had firm roots in the Federal Writers’ Project’s activities. Very few, if any, interviewers working under the Federal Writers’ Project had more oral history training than a list of questions in their hands and orders from their superiors to utilize them in some degree of variation.³⁶ These amateur historians, white-collar workers of all kinds, participated in the first active execution of a democratic process of history. In addition, the Project used and made popular the method of interviews and other techniques oral historians use today and, at some length in the 1930s, the use of innovative sound recording technologies. The result of these Oral History Projects, widely noted as the “largest cultural experiment ever,” contributed to the modern concept of oral history.³⁷

Ex-Slave Narratives

America produced slave narratives as early as 1703, although the period between 1836 and 1860 was one of the most significant periods for autobiographical and

³⁵ Charlton, 4.

³⁶ Stephanie Shaw, “Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (2003): 629.

³⁷ Taylor, *Soul of a People*, 2.

biographical slave narratives. The intention of such material was to “challenge the roseate portrait of slavery painted by its apologists.” During this period abolitionists published and promoted several thousand personal accounts of slavery in autobiographical and biographical form.³⁸ By 1840 twelve anti-slavery journals were in publication across the United States, and all were eager to get accounts of slaves’ experiences to discount the “peculiar institution.”³⁹ In addition to journals, judicial records, private printings, abolitionist newspapers and volumes, church records, and other unpublished collections all contained slave narratives.⁴⁰ Following the Civil War the production of slave narratives greatly diminished, and those that did appear reflected a different impression of slave life. No longer in need of abolitionist propaganda, these narratives carried a feeling of “nostalgic and sentimental reaffirmation of the ‘plantation legend’ popularized by southern local colorists.”⁴¹

A resurgence in slave narratives occurred during the 1920s and 1930s due to a growing interest in preserving the stories of the dwindling former slave population. These slave narratives took on a different character than past narratives. More sociological in nature, these accounts replaced past dramatic and propaganda features with inquiries of the “typical” daily slave life, allowing the respondent to discuss freely their range of experiences and impressions of the institution of slavery.⁴² The process to

³⁸ Norman R. Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Autumn, 1967): 536.

³⁹ Charles H. Nichols, “Who Read the Slave Narratives?” *The Phylon Quarterly* 20 no. 2 (1959): 149.

⁴⁰ Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1981), xviii.

⁴¹ Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” 537.

⁴² *Ibid.*

gather the narratives also changed. In the past slaves wrote them autobiographically, such as Frederick Douglass' infamous account *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, or biographically, with the aid of an abolitionist documenting the slave's stories. In the late 1920s however, interviewers began creating detailed questionnaires designed to incite stories of life in slavery.

Timing, the effect of racism, and a growing interest in African American culture contributed to this resurgence in gathering and studying slave narratives in the 1930s. By the 1920s more than fifty years had passed since emancipation, and the number of living former slaves was dwindling. While these diminishing numbers accounted for the project's urgency, cultural factors also proved significant.

Post-World War I America saw a prevalence of open and academically acceptable racism. Prejudice prevailed in both intellectual and popular beliefs, as many scholars described African Americans as innately and inherently inferior. The social, scientific, and historical scholarship of this time reflected this view, which minimized the severity of slavery. This scholarship "succeeded in neutralizing almost every assumption of the anti-slavery tradition," and the subsequent portrait of slavery reverted back to the antebellum "plantation myth."⁴³ In response, African Americans undertook a revitalization of their own culture to counter these beliefs. This movement began with the Harlem Renaissance, which redefined America's view of the African American population on a cultural and sociological level. African Americans instituted and promoted the Renaissance as an effort to communicate a sense of dignity and identity to other African Americans. Subsequently, a new interpretation of African American history emerged.

⁴³ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 11.

Civil rights activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois raised African American cultural awareness by fighting to find a solution to racism. Historians such as Carter G. Woodson promoted African American history and culture through the establishment of The Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and subsequently through the publication of the *Journal of Negro History*. This renewed interest in African American culture caught the attention of white writers, musicians, and folklorists, who used these aspects in expanding the literary renaissance, acceptance of jazz music, and interest in black folklore. The rise of sociology and anthropology also played a key role, as scholars sought to understand the concept of American society and culture.⁴⁴

As these factors steadily increased in the 1920s, America's cultural climate highlighted a growing interest in the lives and culture of African Americans, particularly in regard to the stories of former slaves. These interests culminated in America's largest national effort to collect the stories of former slaves through interviews: the Federal Writers' Project's collection of Ex-Slave Narratives. Important projects laid the foundation for this enormous task however. The earliest occurred at Fisk University in 1929, headed by sociologist Charles S. Johnson, and at Southern University and Prairie View State College, both lead by historian John B. Cade. Cade's incentive for both of his projects came from the hope to reinterpret slave history. Provoked by historians who minimized the plight of enslaved African Americans and claimed they were contented with their lot, Cade sought to retain personal accounts of slavery to dispute these claims. Johnson's incentive to gather slave narratives grew from his analysis of plantation life as

⁴⁴ Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 538-40.

an institution. Conducting this community study, Johnson found that the personal accounts of slave life completed his sociological study.⁴⁵

Working under Johnson on the Fisk project was Lawrence D. Reddick, an African American professor of history at Kentucky State College. Reddick proposed expanding this oral history work on a larger scale through relief programs. Reddick felt the story of slavery could not be complete “until we get the view as presented through the slave himself.”⁴⁶ In addition to its historical and sociological value, the project employed jobless African Americans, affording black Americans with a dedicated relief program since they had “been left out generally in the program of recovery.”⁴⁷ The federal government accepted the proposal, and the Writers’ Project inherited the undertaking in April of 1937. Although interviews had occurred in a number of states while part of FERA, the Writers’ Project extended the project across eighteen states and employed African American as well as white employees to conduct interviews.

The Writers’ Project’s slave narratives were a particularly “unique and illuminating source of information” in comparison to earlier narratives of its kind. These nearly 2,400 testimonies describe slave life in detail, and the interviewee’s personal reactions to bondage. They not only provided accounts of the institution of slavery, but also the psychology of the enslaved. Heralded as the most widespread endeavor to acquire slave narratives, the Federal Writers’ Project achieved a high degree of representativeness and inclusiveness from its sample of former slaves. The experiences

⁴⁵ Ibid., 540-41. Although Johnson never published his work, Cade summarized his results in his article “Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves,” *Journal of Negro History* (1935).

⁴⁶ Mangione, 257.

⁴⁷ Yetman, “The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection,” 541.

the interviewees described ranged from situations of single-slave household to households owning up to a thousand slaves, and their treatment spanned from extremely harsh to benevolent. Although the interviewees ranged in age from one to over thirty at the time of emancipation, the majority, at fifty-one percent, were between the ages of six and fifteen years old and mature enough to clearly remember the ante-bellum days.⁴⁸

As with the ante-bellum slave narratives, the Writers' Project provided an opportunity for former slaves to speak out about the "peculiar institution," and share their experiences. The Project's folklore editor, Benjamin A. Botkin, described the slave narratives as "the first attempts of Negroes to write their own history and their earliest literature of self-portraiture." This was a history that was only modestly recorded prior to the 1930s through more traditional documents such as records from planters and overseers, diaries, letters, and journals. The slave narratives, Botkin argued, completed the image of slavery,⁴⁹ and provided the "raw content for a broad documentary of both rural and urban life, interspersed with accounts and traditions of ethnic group traditions."⁵⁰ The federal government's push to include these histories, largely untold, made it possible to record a more inclusive history.⁵¹ Today, scholars refer to these published narratives as "the first black studies" in America.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., 534-35.

⁴⁹ Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, ix.

⁵⁰ Botkin, quoted in the Library of Congress's "Folklore Projects," accessed at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpalife.html>.

⁵¹ Shaw, 624.

⁵² Jerre Mangione, "It's Time for a New W.P.A. for Artists," *New York Times*, April 27, 1975.

As this was the first federally-sponsored endeavor of its kind, former slaves believed they had the government's attention for the first time. Some respondents used the interview to tell of their poor economic circumstances during the Depression, even asking for money, clothes, or food. One interviewee candidly responded to the Project worker's presence with "I's hopin' de government will do somepin fer dis po' ole nigger some time soon.... I had all dem bills ter pay."⁵³ Another respondent asked the worker if she would bring him a shirt to wear the next time she stopped by.⁵⁴ Respondents also used the interview as a weapon against former perceptions of American slavery, much like the ante-bellum narratives. The narratives served as a sort of social protest to the institution, as even those respondents who described their experience as benevolent spoke out against its moral implications. One respondent stated that she "hope dey don't have no more sech, as slavery, fer hit wus turrible."⁵⁵ A more aggressive view on the treatment of slaves came from a Montgomery respondent, who asserted "It's bad to belong to folks dat own you soul an' body; dat can tie you up to a tree...who take a long curlin' whip an' out de blood ever' lick."⁵⁶

Fieldworkers collected the slave narratives through a standardized questionnaire provided by the regional office which outlined various subject areas. Designed by famed folklorist John Lomax, curator of the Archives of American Folk Song of the

⁵³ Ruby Pickens Tartt, *Tom Moore* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁵⁴ Tartt, *Richard Amerson* (1937).

⁵⁵ Preston Klein, *Sara Colquitt* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁵⁶ Margaret Fowler, *Delia Garlic* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Library of Congress and leading developer of American folklore, the questionnaire reflected its folklore origins, as the growing field inspired the document. Lomax served as folklore editor on the Writers' Project from 1936-1937, and was succeeded by Benjamin Botkin. Although a short tenure on the Project, his impact on the Ex-Slave Narratives was immense. Lomax first gained recognition as a collector of cowboy songs, but throughout his long career collected all types of American folksongs, including those from African Americans. Raised in Texas, Lomax based the questionnaire design on his extensive experiences studying Southern folklore and African American songs and culture.

Lomax's first experience with African American culture as a small child proved influential on his life's work and professional development. Nat Blythe was a former slave and bond servant hired by his father, and they became close friends. Lomax taught his friend how to read and write, and found a pleasure in teaching that later urged him to attend college. In addition, he became interested in the African American songs and traditions Blythe taught him, and he took that experience with him throughout his career.⁵⁷ Lomax continued his fascination with issues of race as well as African American culture over the course of his life, particularly the spontaneity and uniqueness of their lore.⁵⁸ Although only on the Writers' Project staff for a brief period, the interview questionnaire he designed "assumed a form and a scope that bore Lomax's imprint and reflected his experience and zeal."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867-1948* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 20-21.

⁵⁸ Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 545.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 550.

The questionnaire consisted of twenty primary questions with additional follow-up questions to further engage the respondent. Questions covered a variety of topics concerning slave life, customs and traditions, and the psychology behind enslavement. These questions encouraged conversation on broad topics such as education, religion, clothing, food, games and recreational activities, politics, marriage, and family life during days of slavery.⁶⁰

Questions on daily life under slavery prompted conversations on the type of work the former slave engaged in, what plantation life was like, what their daily activities consisted of, what kind of punishments they endured, and what their owners were like. Interviewees' responses varied, as some labored in the fields and others worked as house servants. Several had specific duties, such as carriage driver, cook, or garment maker. Regardless of duties however, nearly every respondent talked about their daily routine as starting before the sun rose and continued well after dark, and that the work was often difficult. In addition, many of the respondents reported that although the food and clothing were modest, they were well fed and clothed. Most often meals consisted of cornbread, greens, potatoes, chicken, rabbit, or pork. Those that worked as house servants often received less punishment than those in the fields, since it was typically the overseers that carried out the whippings rather than the owners. Response on punishment varied, and consisted of whippings, solitary confinement with little food, and even burning of the flesh. The most horrific descriptions came from several slaves who

⁶⁰ Manual for the Collection of Ex-Slave Tales (Undated). SG022774 – General Information: Procedures, Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

claimed that following whippings, the overseer would rub red pepper, salt, or vinegar on the blisters to make them burn.⁶¹

Questions concerning customs and traditions focused discussions on narrower topics, many of which were also found in folklore studies. Topics included songs, dances, legends, jokes, holiday celebrations, and religious beliefs of the enslaved. More respondents shared songs and prayers with their interviewer; others shared legends, jokes, or dances. These were carefully documented by each worker, preserving an important piece of African American culture. According to some accounts, respondents participated in celebrations on occasion. Typically held on Saturday nights, for Christmas, or for weddings, these festivities were complete with singing, dancing, drinking, and fiddles.⁶² Conversely, many respondents brushed aside the topic of holiday celebrations, responding that they often were not allowed, and “Us didn’t know nothin’ ‘cept to work.”⁶³ Respondents discussed voodoo, hoodoo, and religion as well, although it is clear that the majority did not take part in religious traditions outside Christianity.

Although these topics proved helpful in gaining a picture of slave life, what set the WPA’s slave narratives apart from previously documented narratives was the detail in which the questionnaire pried into the psychology of the enslaved. Designed to inquire into the psychology of former slave life, workers asked detailed questions concerning

⁶¹ The most detailed account of this punishment is told by Laura Clark. Ruby Pickens Tartt, *Laura Clark* (1927), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁶² Jim Gillard’s narrative provides a good description of some of these celebrations. Jack Kytte, *Jim Gillard* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁶³ Fowler, *Delia Garlic* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards emancipation, treatment, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, prominent figures such as Abraham Lincoln or Booker T. Washington, slavery in general, and relationships with slave owners. These questions delved deep into the psyche of the slave, and rather than simply recounting tales of slavery they allowed the former slaves to describe their feelings and personal thoughts on slavery.

Interviewers did not always ask every question on the questionnaire during their interviews with ex-slaves, but at least one question is typically addressed in each. The most popular questions were how the Civil War affected the former slave, and what they thought of slavery now that it was over.

Numerous respondents discussed the emotional damages of being enslaved, ranging from solitary comments such as “Honey, dere was a lot of cruel things done in slavery times,”⁶⁴ to more descriptive accounts of specific incidents. For instance, several respondents equated slave auctions to cow or horse auctions, as they were treated like livestock rather than human beings. One such respondent vividly described the anxiety of being put on the auction block and hearing different people bidding for him.⁶⁵ Still more respondents discussed being torn away from their families, and reminisced about the last time they saw their parent, sibling, or child. Perhaps the most emotional accounts of slavery, however, came from the many respondents who discussed the toll that physical labor, whippings, and general demoralization took on them. As one respondent informed of the physical toll, “I been drug about and put through de shackles so bad...I

⁶⁴ Klein, *Carrie Davis* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁶⁵ Mary A. Poole, *Henry Cheatham* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

mos' blin' now and can't hear good neither." These accounts also demonstrated the human ability to endure their plight, as exemplified by one respondent's confession that "Trustin' was de only hope of de pore black critters in dem days. Us jest prayed fer strength to endure it to de end. We didn't 'spect nothin' but to stay in bondage 'till we died."⁶⁶

Although the Project expected interviewers to cover a majority of the given topics, Regional Director William T. Couch encouraged writers to use their discretion with how rigidly to use the questionnaire during the interview, though never abandoning the outline altogether. For instance, the interviewer may reverse the questionnaire's order, begin with an item they consider important, or limit themselves to just a partial section. More importantly, administrators encouraged workers to engage their respondent in conversation and let that conversation carry them forward over the course of the interview. In addition, administrators asked staff to discover the true feeling behind the interviewee's words despite of his or her own attitudes towards the respondent, and avoid expressions of judgment. Regardless of the subject, their own opinions and feelings should not be present in their writing, and Couch threatened that "any story which this principle is violated will be worthless."⁶⁷

By 1937 all Southern states received the questionnaire and the Ex-Slave Narrative Project commenced in Alabama. Although only twenty-two of sixty-seven Alabama counties participated in this project, employees produced nearly 120 slave narratives

⁶⁶ Fowler, *Delia Garlic* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files as the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁶⁷ Manual for the Collection of Life Histories, November, 15 1938. Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

between 1937 and 1939. The collection highlighted a broad spectrum of experiences, and achieved a degree of representativeness and inclusiveness from its sample that is characteristic of the larger body of Southern slave narratives. Staff in Alabama interviewed nearly an equal number of males and females, ranging in ages from one year to forty-five years of age at the time of emancipation. Given the nature of the questionnaire and interview process, every narrative is distinct and generally focused on only several of the major topics found in the questionnaire. Ranging in length from one to ten pages, each product was a literary representation of the conversation between interviewer and respondent. Interviewers often interspersed direct quotes within their work, and used regional dialect and idioms to capture the true sentiment of the interview. Topics in the Alabama narratives broadly ranged from labor, family, religion, recreation, living accommodations, customs, treatment, relationship with their owners, emancipation, and more. In addressing such a diverse range of experiences, the Alabama collection is an illuminating source on slave life.

Respondents discussed an assortment of both positive and negative treatment during slavery. One of the more severe accounts of treatment was recounted by Delia Garlic of Cleburne County, who when referring to slavery declared “Dem days wuz hell,” and “dey warn’t no good times at de house.” Delia provided rich detail of her family getting torn apart, whippings, slave auctions, and other cruel experiences. In response to slave auctions, Delia’s reaction was bitter and represented the humiliation felt by enslavement: “Course dey cry; you think dey not cry when dey wuz sold lak cattle? I could tell you ‘bout it all day, but even den you couldn’t guess de awfulness of it.” In addition to whippings from overseers, she discussed cruel treatment from her masters as

well, including having her flesh burned and getting knocked unconscious by a piece of firewood .⁶⁸ In contrast, other slaves reported less severe treatment, and Emma Chapman of Pickens County even described a contented experience in slavery. Owned by a reverend on a small plantation, Emma conveyed that she was generally comfortable with her situation. Her narrative portrayed a life of relaxed rules, no whippings, plenty of food and clothes, and she even had Saturdays off from work. In fact, she stated that she “wishes she could go back to plantation days,” as all her trials and suffering came after she left the plantation.⁶⁹

Respondents resided in a variety of living situations. Some were owned by rich families and some by poor, and some lived on plantations with as few as six slaves, while others lived on plantations with 200 or more slaves.⁷⁰ Their experiences varied, but several things often remained the same. With few exceptions, most of the slaves said they did not know their birthdays or how old they were at the time of the interview, they were not allowed schooling or to attend their own churches, they were rarely allowed to leave the plantation or fraternize with slaves on neighboring plantation, and only approximately half were allowed to celebrate holidays. In addition, nearly all had received at least one whipping during slavery, or spoke of someone close to them who

⁶⁸ Fowler, *Delia Garlic* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁶⁹ Poole, *Emma Chapman* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁷⁰ Charity Anderson worked as a house servant with five other slaves. Her master did not own land and did not plant crops, which reduced the number of slaves. Tom McAlpin spoke of living on a small plantation of 100 acres with only 12 slaves, including house servants and field hands. In contrast, George Dillard recalled that his plantation was about 2,000 acres with 200 slaves working the land. Ila B. Prine, *Charity Anderson* (1937); John Morgan Smith, *Tom McAlpin* (1937); Alice L. Barton, *George Dillard* (1937). Manuscripts found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

had been “whipped.” Interestingly, most noted that their masters were good and kind to them, but the overwhelming majority were deeply frightened of their overseers, as they were the ones who would most often carry out the beatings.

One of the most notable writers of Alabama Ex-Slave Narratives was Ruby Pickens Tartt, who today is known as one of the foremost chroniclers of slave narratives, folklore, and folk music. Her narratives often served as examples for other Alabamians and writers in other Southern states. As a white woman brought up in a predominantly black, rural county, Tartt lived her life in close contact with African American culture. Upholding the opinion that Negro songs and stories were a folk art that held “original and significant contributions to American life and culture,” Tartt’s reputation for keeping notes about what she heard and saw reached state director Myrtle Miles. Miles promptly offered Tartt the position of chairman of the Writers’ Project in Sumter County, which she was reluctant to accept. Although Tartt attempted to explain to Miles that she was not a writer and could not compose a proper sentence to save her life, Miles assured her that writing sentences was not going to be a part of her job description. With that, the State Director assigned Tartt to transcribing Negro spirituals. Tartt’s work gained her professional recognition and a strong friendship with Lomax. With Lomax’s aid, Tartt contributed to American culture by collecting and preserving hundreds of songs throughout her life.⁷¹

By 1937, Miles expanded Tartt’s duties to include collecting slave narratives as well. Although still adamant she was not a writer and repeatedly contended that she wrote narratives for the Project simply because she needed the job, it was difficult to see

⁷¹ Virginia Pounds Brown and Laurella Owens, *Toting the Lead Row: Ruby Pickens Tartt, Alabama Folklorist* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 12-16.

Tartt as anything but an experienced literary figure.⁷² Tartt contributed greatly to the Oral History Projects by writing and editing many of the pages sent to the regional and national editorial offices. She wrote over a dozen slave narratives, and documented even more African American folklore traditions and songs. Her narratives are indicative of the larger body of Alabama narratives, as she covers a wide range of topics in her work. Tartt wrote about food, childhood games and rhymes, availability of education and church, wedding and funeral customs, conjure, treatment by owner and overseer, and punishment during slavery. Many of Tartt's narratives contained at least one song, as documenting spirituals was her specialty. In addition to writing about slave life, Tartt's narratives offered great detail on living conditions in rural Alabama during the Depression as well.

Most of Tartt's narratives followed a fairly uniform structure, and began with a detailed description of her physical surroundings and the subject being interviewed, as the following excerpt illustrates:

I had left the McDowell road far behind me and had been driving several miles along a winding, rutted wagon track through fields of unpicked cotton, when a sudden turn brought me abruptly to a cabin door. A tall patch of sorghum shimmering and swaying in the light afternoon breeze sheltered and concealed it on one side; behind it a limestone bluff shone whitely against the deep green of the cedars and pines which crowned it; and in the foreground, at a little distance, stretched the swamp, dark and impenetrable, and to the imaginative mind teeming with a mysterious, even threatening, life of its own.⁷³

Her narratives generally transitioned into a question posed by Tartt, who in turn provided the respondent's answer in direct quotes in a fluid narrative. The technique Tartt used to gather these histories was conversational, as requested by the regional office.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Tartt, *Susanna Ross* (1938), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Additionally, she wrote her narratives in an articulate and flowing manner that, in addition to transcribing the individual's story, demonstrated a reciprocal ease between her and the interviewee. One of the most striking features of her narratives remained her ability to describe the interplay between characters, as exemplified in the following passage:

As I stepped onto the gallery calling for Carrie, an ancient and emaciated Negress rose and embraced me. "How's my mammy?" she exclaimed patting and hugging me, "I'm more 'en glad to see you. How's my mammy. I calls all my white folks mammy when they comes to see how I'm gitting erlong. How's my mammy." Suddenly releasing me, she staggered backwards, arms flailing the air, and whether with the excitement of my visit or from causes of a physical nature, seemed unable to maintain her balance.⁷⁴

As in many other ex-slave narratives, Tartt not only documented the testimony of the respondent but also painted a visual arrangement for readers to offer a full picture of the interaction. A combination of verbatim dialect and detailed description of the meeting itself gave readers the ability to almost "hear the tones and the accents, and see the facial expressions and bodily movements, and sense the sometimes almost occult influences" of the respondent, as requested by administrators.⁷⁵

Documenting these detailed descriptions of the interview setting included inflections on language and physical features of the respondent as well. These nuances added a sense of emotion to the respondent's story. For instance, one interviewer wrote the following description of his interviewee:

Uncle Will, a gaunt, black figure with two weeks growth of gray hair upon his face, spoke in a soft, quaking voice scarcely audible ten feet away. His eyes had a faroff, sad expression of one who had known suffering. They were set deep back in bony caverns.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*, xiv.

This introduction to the narrative set up the reader for the rest of the interview. The description not only illustrated the respondent's physical features, but allowed the reader to extract an emotional quality to the interview as well. The narrative continued on to describe the terrible treatment he received from his master and overseer, and described a specific incident concerning his brother being whipped until he bled and screamed. Midway through his tale, he paused and the author noted: "Will's eyes narrowed down to fine creases as his thick lips came together...and the loose skin beneath his chin, and jaws seemed to shake with the impact of dread memories."⁷⁶ Although not every narrative contained such a rich visual account of the respondent's demeanor and physical nuances, the interviews that do help the reader understand the psychology of the enslaved. These details are what set the WPA narratives apart from past ventures.

The topics specified by the Project's questionnaire proved important to gain a complete picture of slave life. It was clear that all of the Alabama narratives used it to varying degrees, and typically stimulated questions about daily life and routine of the enslaved. The narratives ranged from short narratives that consist of a brief tale, to longer more detailed narratives that touched on nearly all twenty designated questions. For instance, Francois Ludgere Diard's narrative with Bettie Massingale Bell of Mobile touched on numerous subjects throughout its nine pages. Topics included her family, treatment, work she partook in on the plantation, the family she worked for, and her attitude towards emancipation. In addition, she made many observations on clothing, food, religion, songs, and festivals.⁷⁷ In contrast, a four-page interview by Tartt with an

⁷⁶ Smith, *William Colbert* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁷⁷ Francois Ludgere Diard, *Bettie Massingale Bell* (1939), manuscript found in the Works Progress

Ank Bishop in Sumter County was limited to a single topic, and discussed at length the former slave's attitudes and experiences with religion, conjure, and voodoo.⁷⁸

Although numerous Alabama respondents discussed the thoughts, feelings, and psychology of being enslaved and their subsequently freedom, most described the daily routine of slave life as well. Many discussed life after slavery at length, and reminisced about the day they learned of their freedom. Fewer provided much detail beyond expressing either joys or concerns of being set free however. This in part could be due to certain biases by the interviewers, who were primarily white and could have edited offending material out of their narratives accordingly. It could also be a product of the "paternalistic" relationships whites and African Americans shared in the Deep South, where blacks still largely depended upon the aid of their white neighbors.

Throughout the South, African Americans often survived by holding jobs as servants and other household occupations for white families, and social amenities required blacks to still be respectful of the "white folk."⁷⁹ The respondent's language reflected this relationship between whites and African Americans. The speech was often respectful, as the respondent referred to their white interviewers as "Mammy" or "Marsa," while the respondent is referred to by their first name, often preceded by "Aunt" or "Uncle." In addition, the respondent often expressed an admiration for the white population, as exemplified by Charity Grigsby's comment "Law me, honey, I'se always proud when de white folks drap around'," or Richard Amerson's statement, "I jest

Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁷⁸ Tartt, *Ank Bishop* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁷⁹ Brown and Owens, 14.

nachelly hates to set 'roun' white folks ragged and dirty like I is."⁸⁰ Both groups understood this relationship in the 1930s, and African Americans may have avoided tales of appalling treatment in fear of offending whites and upsetting this balance. Furthermore, African American respondents may have simply been distrustful of the white interviewer, or their government employee status, and felt coerced into saying what they felt the interviewer wanted to hear. Furthermore, the cruel nature of slavery itself may have shaped interviewee responses, with the harshest aspects of slave life more difficult to discuss and commonly avoided. On multiple occasions respondents openly dodged topics, with claims such as, "I kin tell you things about slavery times dat would make yo' blood bile, but dey's too terrible. I jus' tries to forgit."⁸¹

The Alabama narratives contained numerous examples of respondents who discussed the psychology of enslavement, and are helpful in illustrating true feelings towards slavery. One such example comes from Levi D. Shelby's interview with former slave William Henry Towns of Tuscumbia. William described slavery in the following words:

Sometimes I visit ol' Mingo White an' me an' him talks over dem days dat me and him was boys. We gits to talkin' an' 'fore yer know it ol' Mingo is cryin' like a baby. 'Cordin' ter what he says he is lucky ter be alivin'. Dis is one thing I never likes ter talk about. When slavery was goin' on it was all right for me 'cause I never had it hard, but it jes' wan't right to treat human bein's dat way. If we hadn't a had to work an' slave for nothin' we might have sompin' to show for what we did do an' wouldn't have to live from pillar to pos' now.⁸²

⁸⁰ Tartt, *Charity Grigsby* (1937); Tartt, *Richard Amerson* (1937). Manuscripts found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁸¹ Tartt, *Amy Chapman* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁸² Levi D. Shelby, *William Henry Towns* (1937), manuscript found in the Works Progress Administration Files at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Although the topic was difficult for William to discuss, this narrative is a true display of how a former slave viewed the institution of slavery. His proclamation that “it jes’ wan’t right to treat human bein’s dat way” demonstrated a deep moral commitment against the institution. In addition, regret enters the conversation as he recognized that his present life may have been considerably different “if we hadn’t a had to work an’ slave for nothin’.” The selection also effectively juxtaposed two very different treatments of enslaved persons. While William described his experience as “all right,” his friend Mingo White experienced many hardships of slavery and was “lucky ter be alivin’.”

As one of the few African American employees on the Alabama Project roster, Shelby may have helped the respondent feel comfortable answering questions openly. Although the slave narrative project began with an interest in hiring African American Project workers, many of the Southern states generally did not employ African American personnel, despite Sterling Brown’s efforts. After much dispute between Brown and Miles however, Alabama employed three: Levi Shelby of Colbert County, Rhussus Perry of Macon County, and Louise Porter of Mobile County. Although a small number, it was a victory for African Americans in Alabama nonetheless. These three African Americans collected a number of Ex-Slave Narratives, but also researched and wrote material about prominent African American figures in Alabama’s history, recorded life histories, and collected local folklore.

The Alabama narratives do have weaknesses, and concerns about honesty, and forthrightness was an issue plaguing every state’s effort. However, the narratives do adequately serve their purpose of providing a private look into the life of slavery in Alabama. While many of the narratives were indicative of the fact that many of the

workers were not professional writers, most of the nearly 120 Alabama narratives were well written and contained an assortment of information. Furthermore, in the process of collecting these stories, Alabama Project workers discovered much about African American folklore. During many of the interviews, former slaves discussed traditional songs, foods, clothing, legends, prayers, and customs, and were carefully documented by the interviewer. The way in which the Project encouraged personnel to write the narratives also proved important. Although each narrative consisted of significant verbatim sections of the interview, Project administrators urged writers to provide vivid detail of the interview itself and the atmosphere in which it took place, subsequently documenting African American life in the 1930s. As Tartt's writing demonstrates, the slave narratives also provided illustrations of the relationships between white and black Alabamians in the 1930s, in conjunction with the initial goal of documenting slave life.

Life Histories

The Life Histories Project documented the lives of ordinary Alabamians to discover and celebrate the human factors in Alabama culture. Using methods similar to those used by Middletown personnel and other sociologists of the time, such as field research and interviews, Project employees gathered life stories, personal anecdotes, and reminiscences to study the lives of Americans. The Southern regional office, located in North Carolina, oversaw the effort to distinctively portray Southern living. Workers' manuals highlighted the project's goal to "secure material which will give an accurate, honest, interesting, and fairly comprehensive view of the kind of life that is lived by the majority of the people in the south." It was important to interview Southerners from all

walks of life to garner an inclusive picture, from those “who get along well” to those who “make a less favorable impression,” the “sub-normal, the normal, and above normal” all had interesting stories.⁸³ Lacking accounts of several working class groups, Project administrators placed emphasis on groups such as farmers and tenant farmers, mill workers, and workers in industrial and service occupations. People in both rural and urban slums were interviewed, presumably to account for the masses of unemployed. Additionally, African Americans “who have achieved distinction” were also included as an understudied group. The administration instructed employees to gather any folklore, songs, and legends of interest throughout the process, as well as a case history of the interviewee.⁸⁴

In his 1938 memorandum to Southern state directors, Couch provided a clear picture of Oral History Project expectations in the South. Acknowledging earlier scholarly works on underrepresented Southerners and noting how few case studies existed, he thoroughly identified the need for studies that addressed the individual’s experience. Nearly all of these examples were products of sociological studies, though they possessed historical advantages. One important model was Rupert B. Vance’s *Human Factors in Cotton Culture*, a 1929 study that utilized case histories to narrate the human side of cotton culture of the South. Vance argued that throughout history the demand of cotton as a staple crop influenced the region, and when a society is dependent on an agricultural climate it governs not only “man’s interest and habits, but also his

⁸³ Manual for the Collection of Life Histories, November 15, 1938. Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁸⁴ William T. Couch, “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South,” July 11, 1938. SG022769 – General Information: Personnel Instructions, Works Progress Administration File, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

social organization.” Vance and his team of social scientists at the University of North Carolina studied the human factors in this Southern culture not through the more standard documentary evidence, but rather through various case studies, or personal stories.⁸⁵

Although studies such as Vance’s were becoming increasingly widespread, his volume was of particular interest to Couch and his administrative staff for a couple of reasons. First it dealt with tenant farmers and sharecroppers, a subject that the Project administration deemed essential. As Couch indicated in his memorandum, very little “trustworthy” material was available on the personal stories of tenant farmers and their families by this time, and its importance in studying life in the South ought to be realized.⁸⁶ His second reason involved a specific case story adopted by Vance, one that used journalistic techniques. Although the majority of tenant farmers’ testimonies that Vance gathered were through letters, reports, and journal sources, he used one from a 1921 feature story printed in the *Raleigh News and Observer*. Interviewing an “ordinary poor white tenant,” journalist Ben Dixon MacNeill wrote a vivid representation of Southern life using an approach that came “dangerously near the real case study method”⁸⁷ even though he lacked any technical sociological training. Couch used this example in an attempt to curtail opinions that “only sociologists can get case histories that are worth getting.”⁸⁸ Couch wished to demonstrate that case studies such as this one

⁸⁵ Rupert B. Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1929), vii.

⁸⁶ Couch, “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South,” July 11, 1938. SG022769 – General Information: Personnel Instructions, Works Progress Administration File, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁸⁷ Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture*, 259 fn 8.

⁸⁸ Couch, “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the

could be conducted by any member of the Writers' Project using interview techniques often utilized by journalists, and that the stories could be both valuable and entertaining.

Conversely, in discussing the remaining categories, Couch recognized that no personal case histories existed for the majority of other under-studied groups. Although sociologists attempted to study several of these groups prior to the late 1930s, those analyses remained statistical compilations and treated the groups solely as masses with similar attitudes, customs, and habits. For example, in significant sociological studies of the American South such as J.J. Rhynes' *Some Southern Cotton Mill Workers and their Villages* and Lois Macdonald's *Southern Mill Hands*, not a single life history existed. By failing to include the life stories of those being studied, scholars such as Rhynes and Macdonald failed to present their subjects "as a living person who has a past and a present."⁸⁹

Couch and his administration sought to fill these gaps by sending Project employees into the field to gather personal testimonies from otherwise faceless Southern individuals. By integrating new procedures to acquire case histories, such as the interview techniques employed by the journalist in Vance's study, Couch envisioned converging literary and journalistic qualities with the social sciences in order to obtain accurate life histories. Couch argued that while sociologists tend to treat their subjects as abstractions, these new interviewing trends would result in case studies "from a human point of view."⁹⁰ Employing this methodology, Couch effectively united the disciplines

South," July 11, 1938. SG022769 – General Information: Personnel Instructions, Works Progress Administration File, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

of sociology, history, and journalism. Furthermore, using these interview techniques for case histories proved to be a step towards establishing standards seen in the oral history profession today.

The life histories contributed to delineating interview techniques and led to new literary works, making both the process and product innovative. Working from the new interview and research trends in sociology, Couch announced that “this method of portraying the quality of life of a people, of revealing the real workings of institutions, customs, habits, has never before been used for the people of any region or country.” By using these sociological methods the result was much different from prior literature on life in the South, the majority of which was fiction. As Couch states, “the method here used has certain possibilities and advantages which should no longer be ignored.”⁹¹ As Mark Twain suggested in the nineteenth century, the novelist is charged with recreating the life and the people of the whole nation. The soul of the American people – their character, manners, feelings, and ambitions – can only be truly described through their own words. Writers with the Federal Writers’ Project, for the first time in history, set out to do so.

The “certain possibilities and advantages” Couch envisioned also included the significance of the writing itself and not just the techniques it took to obtain the life histories. Striving to obtain a “fair picture of the structure and working of society,” Couch explained that these histories were also meant to be authentic and readable representations of living Southerners.⁹² As writers, Project workers produced

⁹¹ W.T. Couch, preface to *These are our Lives*, by Member of the Federal Writers’ Project (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), ix.

⁹² Ibid.

information on these groups of Americans while also implementing their literary skills to stimulate the imagination.⁹³ By adopting four criteria for each narrative – accuracy, human interest, social importance, and literary excellence – they were meant to inform and engage their audiences. Realizing it unlikely that all components could be achieved for every narrative, the editors specified that one must always at least keep accuracy and literary excellence.⁹⁴ Couch identified the broad public interest of the oral histories and hoped that they would create a new genre of literature.⁹⁵

The Life Histories, like the Ex-Slave Narratives, used a questionnaire which consisted of ten subjects to direct the interview. These subjects included family, education, income, attitude toward occupation and kind of life, politics, religion and morals, medical needs, diet, miscellaneous observations, and use of time.⁹⁶ As with the slave narratives, administrators urged the interview to be conversational and the questionnaire provided follow-up queries. The majority of the follow-up questions encouraged the respondent to describe their thoughts, feelings, and observations about the topic, rather than provide purely informational detail. Interviewers then carefully transcribed the respondent's words and arranged them verbatim into narratives designed

⁹³ Henry Bennett, "Memorandum to Dr. Botkin concerning ex-slave narratives," February 21, 1941, in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography: Alabama Narratives* by George P. Rawick (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), vi.

⁹⁴ Manual for the Collection of Life Histories, November 15, 1938. Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁹⁵ William T. Couch, "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers' Project in the South," July 11, 1938.

⁹⁶ Outline for Life Histories, Undated. Alabama Writers' Project Life Histories/Stories, General Information and Procedures, Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History. The subject "miscellaneous observations" referred to documenting general physical observations made by the writer when conducting the interview, while the subject "use of time" referred to asking the subject questions about their annual and daily routines, including what they did for leisure.

to stimulate reader interest. Also like the slave narratives, Project workers were instructed to avoid any language concerning preconceived views in their stories. The length of each narrative was expected to be at least ten pages, which added up to approximately 2,500 to 10,000 words, “depending upon the interest of the material.”⁹⁷

Administrators proposed the Life Histories Project in September 1938, and by November the Alabama Project was ahead of other southern states in collecting histories. The Regional Office announced that Alabama employees had already submitted twenty-eight life histories and stories at that time, and several were “excellent and publishable practically as they are.” About half of them, however, were in need of some revision in order to “cut out generalizations and terms expressing the feelings of the writers.”⁹⁸ Couch expected Alabama writers to simply give their description and let the reader draw their own conclusions about the respondent, rather than use emotive terms. Couch returned fifteen of these histories with critiques to fix these issues and the Alabama Project progressed.

The Alabama Project produced Life Histories from only twenty of its sixty-seven counties, though it produced roughly one-hundred histories in just two years. Employees gathered histories from farmers, miners, midwives, mill workers, artists, turpentine workers, lumberjacks, and various other rural and urban Alabamians to gain a representative look at life in the state. Workers interviewed both men and women for the

⁹⁷ “Work on Life Histories,” Memorandum to the State Directors of the Federal Writers’ Project from William T. Couch, Regional Director, November 16, 1938. Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁹⁸ “Work on Life Histories,” Memorandum to the State Directors of the Federal Writers’ Project from William T. Couch, Regional Director, November 16, 1938. Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

collection, as well as diverse populations. This collection of Life Histories offers an encompassing look at a diverse range of experiences in Alabama life.

Although the quality of writing and writing technique vary between authors, the histories contain a wealth of information. Unlike the slave narratives, the life histories tend to follow a less uniform structure. While many of the authors relied heavily on the respondent's verbatim dialog transcribed during the interview, others took a more literary approach by infusing their personal observations of the respondent and their surroundings. These histories provided rich detail about the interview, and the subsequent story read as a piece of finely written fiction. Writer Nettie S. MacDonald is one such author that relied heavily on personal inference in her life histories, as demonstrated by the following:

A moment later, a woman was framed in the doorway, the lines of heavy body emphasized by a close-fitting cotton dress. She said, "Well do come in. I'd begun to think that Jimmie was goin' to keep you down there at th' mine. He ain't got any hospitality at all when you start him talkin' about that place." She shoved a chair forward for her guest, and then walked over to a quilt that swung on a frame in the center of the room. She pushed a needle into its cottony depths, and then drew up a chair for herself. "I've been wishin' somebody would come and stop me from workin' on this quilt," she said. "My back's so tired now it's about to break." She smiled, and tiny wrinkles played around her brown eyes. Rachel Evans is a strong woman, straight-shouldered, and with a determined lift to her chin. Her face is tanned by sun and wind; her hands look as strong and as capable as those of a man. Wisps of gray are beginning to show in her dark brown hair, but her slow smile is contagious, and her eyes are youthful behind thick lashes.⁹⁹

Like Alabama's slave narratives, the histories that incorporated this kind of rich detail remain some of the most interesting and literary satisfying depictions of Southern life.

The reader feels as if they are a part of the scene, standing on the Evans' porch talking

⁹⁹ Nettie S. MacDonald, *Jimmie and Rachel Evans* (1938).

with Rachel. MacDonald did this while managing to heed Couch's request of excluding the author's personal feelings.

Not every writer included personal observations, however. Writer Jack Kytle wrote seven histories, all of which eliminated any literary liberties. Although informative, his histories consisted of a series of direct quotes from the interview, without so much a description of his subject. Conversely, workers Maude Cain and Charles Donigan recounted their respondent's stories by using very few direct quotes. In addition, the subject matter varied between histories. While many writers included nearly all the general subject areas identified on the questionnaire, a few others restricted themselves to just a topic or two. Additionally, Alabama's histories vary between presenting the respondent's entire life history, and discussing the details of their current lives. Regardless of the varied writing ability and style however, the collection of Alabama's life histories provided readers a window into Southern life in the early twentieth century.

In addition to men and women in the industries noted by Couch, interviewers also targeted various ethnic groups in the state. Such examples included Life Histories with Cajun residents, and those of Japanese and Belgium origin. An interview with Cajun turpentine worker Jake Gaw is of particular importance, and remains an informative representation of Cajun life in Alabama. Jake was a man of Spanish and Indian descent living in a county with a large Cajun population. As a group, Cajuns in Alabama had a distinct stigma attached to their multicultural people. Considered "colored," they were not openly accepted in white society, and lived in seclusion in the woods of south

Alabama. Throughout his life history, it became apparent that Jake and his wife used the interview as an opportunity to dispel myths about the Cajun people.

A common perception of the Cajun people was that they were “shiftless and unwilling to help themselves.” Jake and his wife Elizabeth dismissed this claim, and resentfully replied that “You will find lazy people everywhere...and you will find some smart people, too. I don’t a-believe anybody could call me lazy.” Additionally, they contended that many Cajuns would “a-get out and do something if they had somebody to set them on their feet just once,” referring to the lack of interest Alabamians and the nation had in the Cajun people. In addition, the Gaw’s further dispeled this myth by asserting their support for education. As a school teacher at the county school for the Cajun people, Elizabeth spoke at length about the importance of a good education. She and her husband communicated their concerns about the segregated Cajun schools, and how limited their resources were. Not having a high school of their own let alone a college, the Gaw’s expressed a desire to someday acquire the resources for these. As Jake pointed out, Africans Americans “have their college up at Tuskegee. Why can’t we have one? Why, those kids over in my wife’s school are bright as they can be.” They also shared ideas that would bring positive change to their school system, but noted how difficult it was to implement such change when the Cajun people had so little assistance.¹⁰⁰

In addition to ethnic populations, workers conducted interviews with African Americans. Miles assigned Rhussus Perry, one of three African American staff personnel, to gather Life Histories of African Americans “who have achieved

¹⁰⁰ Kytte, *Jake and Elizabeth Gaw* (1938).

distinction.” A resident of Macon County, Perry interviewed a variety of individuals from around the Tuskegee area and who had been influenced by the Tuskegee Institute. These respondents included an art professor, a former slave who often visited the campus, and two self-sufficient women living just outside of town.¹⁰¹ These four life histories proved to be highly informative and positive accounts, and offer much to their readers about African Americans in the state.

Although all four interviews were with a variety of respondents, all four histories illustrated how far African Americans had come since slavery. Becky Green, a respected citizen of the Tuskegee area, seemed hardly affected by the economic woes of the Depression. Although her house was in need of repair, her life history exhibits a woman that did not go hungry. Becky lived on her own but made a life for herself through her gardens and livestock, and worked hard so she can “allus have plenty [food] fer myself and others too.”¹⁰² Similarly, Janey Leonard’s life history exhibited a woman deeply motivated to make something of herself. Even as a child she dreamed of having nice things, and according to her history she accomplished this. The author described her house as a “very attractive” bungalow complete with picturesque flower gardens, and was as “modern and attractively furnished as any city home.” Motivated by the belief that one should “work and try to make a mark in life so that someone would know that I lived and had not lived in vain,” Janey accomplished a great many things in her life. A very knowledgeable woman, Janey attended Tuskegee Institute and went on to operate her own farm. She was inspired by Booker T. Washington, and discussed how he assisted

¹⁰¹ Brown, *Up Before Daylight*, 158.

¹⁰² Rhussus L. Perry, *Becky Green* (1938).

farmers like herself by lecturing about how to get into the business of raising and selling produce for a profit.¹⁰³

Father and Mother Timmons were former slaves, but their life history illustrated how a person can reach their goals just by working hard to get what they want. Although their life history discussed their past as slaves, it focused more on the Timmons' appreciating what they accomplished since, such as owning a home of their own.

“Working to git all my chillum a home. I got eight, an’ all eight of dem got forty acres of land” Father Timmons bragged, illustrating a sense of pride in his work. The Timmons’ history painted an optimistic picture during the Great Depression, as they rejoiced in how far they have come.¹⁰⁴ Jakob Hawthorne, sculptor and professor of art at the Tuskegee Institute, presented an impressive background in his history. With art training that included the New England Conservatory of Music at Boston, the Cincinnati Art Academy, and the Pittsburgh Normal School in Pittsburgh, Kansas, it was not difficult to understand why Hawthorn was chosen as an African American “who had achieved distinction.” Driven to sculpt and teach, Hawthorne’s life history highlighted the responsibility he felt to his fellow African Americans and how he chose to honor that. Hawthorn described an incident of visiting an art exhibition at a young age and not seeing a statue or bust of Frederick Douglass. Disappointed with this because “truly great people are perpetuated in marble and bronze,” Hawthorne made up his mind to dedicate his life to honoring his fellow African Americans.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Perry, *Janey Leonard* (1938).

¹⁰⁴ Perry, *At Father Timmons' Home* (1938).

¹⁰⁵ Perry, *Jakob Hawthorne, Sculptor* (1938).

Although the Project gathered many of these histories to learn about Americans in various industries and occupations, other themes are prominent throughout the work. These themes included labor, religion, medicine, politics, marriage, family, education, and basic life experiences. In addition to providing these insights into Alabama life in the early twentieth century, however, the histories also supplied a look at Depression America, particularly in the South. Many of the histories illustrated how Alabamians coped with the economic decline. While not all of Alabama's respondents discussed their economic status, several histories, like the one from Arthur Lee Emerson, described how their lives changed and how they got by. As Arthur articulated, his family depended on cornbread, cowpeas, sorghum molasses, milk, and butter to "hold body and soul together." His history detailed the lack of flour available to his family for baking, and their clothing and bedding were "mostly rags," however, they were determined to "struggle on."¹⁰⁶

As entertaining as the stories are, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the histories was their ability to let ordinary men and women express their attitudes, beliefs, and observations on life, politics, and family. Illustrating the strength and wisdom of an average Alabamian, one respondent talked about continuing on after life's hardships, and summed up his hopeful attitude in one word: "Tomorrow...I loves that word. There is something wonderful about tomorrow. In that tomorrow toward which I am looking forward, [my wife] and I shall be together again with our children."¹⁰⁷ Another respondent shared his view on community, and how to make the world a better place in

¹⁰⁶ Covington Hall, *Arthur Lee Emerson* (1938).

¹⁰⁷ Adelaide Rogers, *James Little* (1939).

the midst of hardship. His own thoughts on contributing to society are examined in the following:

I believe that, in our own lives, we must look to a higher control. We must be contented today and work hard tomorrow. We must cooperate and have forgiveness to each other. The trouble today, everybody wants their own way, nobody give in. We should have community spirit, be good neighbors. Peacefulness and happiness should govern all our lives.¹⁰⁸

Facilitating a public understanding of ordinary Alabamian's attitudes and beliefs was unprecedented. The Life Histories offered these insights to the public, and provided subsequent historians with material to draw on when writing state and regional histories.

Although staff essentially interviewed respondents at random and they represented the average American, their stories are full of wisdom and their observations have value to readers of all kind. Regardless of how many decades pass, readers today can still learn from these stories. As Twain foretold, these histories provided insight into the soul of the people, and that will forever remain relevant. With this, Couch succeeded in his quest to develop stories that represented a fair picture of society while also providing readable works with stories that resonate with the American public.

Folklore

In addition to the Ex-Slave Narratives and Life Histories, the Writers' Project possessed a unique opportunity to collect folklore on a national level. Administrators instructed workers to travel the back roads of their communities and document "fading" aspects of American life, focusing on regional folklore since "America's unique cultures grew out of its varied landscapes and its natural and man-made vistas." By highlighting

¹⁰⁸ Prine, *Teiichi Mayumi* (1938).

the cultural aspects that made each region distinctive, Project administrators hoped to retain and celebrate the inherent character of each region before traditions faded in the ever-changing nation.¹⁰⁹ The South, particularly Alabama, was not originally regarded as a great “ethnological melting pot” by the public, and did not believe Alabama’s traditions were colored by many different beliefs from varied nationalities. The Folklore Project played an integral role in reversing this notion however, as the Alabama Project contributed to discovering that Alabama did, in fact, have a diverse population.¹¹⁰

Benjamin Botkin and his predecessor John Lomax shaped the Folklore Project. Botkin described the Project’s folklore as the common interests and purposes that bind a group together. Whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, all groups possess a body of traditions that have been assimilated into the group through patterns of repetition and variation, until value and continuity occurs. The Project sought folklore similar to other folklore studies during this era, and included traditions of songs, rhymes, dances, tales, superstitions, beliefs and customs, gatherings and activities, and other linguistic material.¹¹¹ Much of this material was a byproduct of the Ex-Slave Narratives and Life Histories Projects, but workers sought out other lore separately, which they collected and documented through personal observations and use of a folklore-specific questionnaire.

Administrators specifically established the questionnaire to assist Project workers in recording the folklore’s origin. This included documenting its source, history, past and

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, 14-15.

¹¹⁰ J. Edward Rice, “Some Specimens Alabama Folklore,” March 26, 1937, to the State Directors of the Federal Writers’ Project from William T. Couch, Regional Director, November 16, 1938. Folklore: Essays, Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

¹¹¹ “Folklore: Its Nature and Study,” Federal Writers’ Project Folklore Manual, Undated. SG022773 – Folklore: General Information, Procedure, Works Progress Administration Files, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

present use, and the experience of the people who kept it alive.¹¹² The Alabama Project collected three broad classifications of folklore: Native American lore, African American lore, and the lore of white men. Project staff also gathered additional lore such as Creole and hillbilly lore, but the majority fell under the first three categories. Conducted in thirty-four counties, the resulting collection of written folklore is a vast body of wealth to Alabama culture. As Tartt acknowledged about her state's African American songs and stories, Alabama contained rich and imaginative folklore that was one of the most "original and significant contributions to American life and culture."¹¹³

Conclusion

The Alabama Writers' Project succeeded in giving voice to the underrepresented people of Alabama through interviews with former slaves and ordinary citizens. The Ex-Slave Narratives elucidated the state's slave history, and retold this history through the perspective of the slave. The interviewees informed Project staff of their daily routine under slavery, but they also conveyed the psychological impact of slavery on the human condition, and shared their thoughts, attitudes, and feelings about the institution of slavery. The Life Histories exposed the lives of Alabamians across the state, and revealed a wealth of information on everyday life in Alabama. Staff documented anecdotes, opinions, and attitudes of a multitude of people, uncovering what life was like to in Alabama during the first half of the twentieth century. The Folklore Project overlapped with the other two programs, and through the interviews revealed that

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Brown and Owens, 14.

Alabama was a state entrenched in tradition. In addition to documenting the lives of the marginalized, the Oral History Projects revealed larger themes in U.S. history, such as the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, World War I, and other subjects such as rural life, agriculture, labor, and industry.

The Oral History Projects demonstrated the Writers' Project's goal to unearth distinct cultural and historical aspects of each state, and celebrated the individual. By interviewing former slaves and ordinary Alabamians, the Project made lasting contributions to a new understanding of history and culture in the state. Individual characteristics, cultures, and background of the state made up Alabama's portrait, and the Project recorded these for posterity. The Alabama Project succeeded in its mission of discovering and defining the culture, or cultures, of the state by documenting the previously untold stories of underrepresented populations. It was the state's first effort to create a history of Alabama that paid attention to the great majority of people, particularly those on the lowest social rungs, and for the first time was inclusive of minority groups.¹¹⁴ The interviews documented history at an individual level, and revealed a more diverse Alabama. It produced a remarkable biography of the state, and created cultural legacies that remain relevant today.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹¹⁵ Spark Media, Inc., advertisement for "Soul of a People: Writing America's Story," accessed <http://american-voices.net>.

CHAPTER THREE

Legacy of the Federal Writers' Project: Transforming American Historical Perspective

At the height of the Great Depression the Federal Writers' Project set out to scrutinize every aspect of the country to discover and present American history and culture to the public. Project architects carefully chose endeavors that would make a “lasting contribution to a new understanding of American culture,” and among the most celebrated were the *American Guide Series* and Oral History Projects.¹ Although the Writers' Project lasted for only seven years, the extent of its accomplishment is remarkable. The Project arguably supplied some of America's greatest contributions to literature, cultural studies, history, and oral history, and produced some of the nation's greatest historical resources during its existence.

The Project left behind many documents of enduring value that contributed to America's cultural and historical landscapes. The guidebooks created a portrait of the American cultural and physical landscape through essays and travel guides, transporting the public down the roads of America to rediscover what it meant to be American, while the Oral History Projects documented personal accounts of ordinary Americans and former slaves and left behind countless written records of underrepresented populations for generations of subsequent scholars. Although two distinct tasks, both projects

¹ Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 1.

achieved the administration's ultimate goal of discovering and redefining what was "American." However, throughout its existence critics widely derided the Writers' Project, as scholars and the American public underappreciated its undertakings. While the public did often use the guides upon publication, they generally ignored the oral history material for decades following the Project's termination. Changing trends in historical writing and in the use of documentary evidence facilitated the material's neglect, and subsequently fueled its reemergence in the 1970s. Since the 1970s, the Writers' Project has enjoyed a revival as both scholars and the public have re-examined its accomplishments, finally recognizing its materials as important sources with significant historical and cultural value.

The Alabama Writers' Project's slave narratives, life histories, and guidebook created a portrait of 1930s Alabama. These programs represented the first effort to document Alabama history in terms of its communities, traditions, and culture. Furthermore, the Project documented this local and community history by highlighting the state's diversity. The Project left behind a rich repository of historical data for both scholars and the public, and although an astounding accomplishment, scholars and the public overlooked this material for decades following the Great Depression. This chapter traces the reasons behind this lack of support following the termination of the Writers' Project, and credits changing trends in historical writing and in the use of documentary evidence as reasons behind the neglect. Similarly, it argues that the emergence of a new social history and renewed interest in local and community history in the 1970s prompted scholars and the public to reevaluate the material. The chapter outlines these changing historical trends, and demonstrates how the material was used in the 1970s and beyond.

It argues that the material changed the landscape of Alabama, slave, and Southern history and concludes that this material, although unread for many years, transformed the way in which scholars and the public perceived, studied, and wrote about history.

The Guidebook Project's enduring value is in its power to reflect the era in which it was written, and it functions as a means of documenting of the period's culture and way of life. States, cities, and regions still update and publish their guides, and they are widely used as a historical resource in literature and in the classroom, confirming their continuing significance. At the time of publication, the guidebooks garnered considerable public attention through announcements and reviews. This early publicity focused on their utilitarian value as travel guides; as time passed, however, historians regarded the guides as a sourcebook for academic study and valued them for their portrayal of 1930s American life as well as for their effort to represent all Americans. The Oral History Projects created a rich archive of experiences to be used by future generations, and today are of great interest to a variety of professions, including historians, folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, theologians, ethnographers, and human ecologists.² However, during the Great Depression they were the least recognized projects and both academics and the public paid them little attention. Although forgotten for several decades, the Oral History Projects' enduring value is in their ability to tell the stories of formally marginalized groups. Today they are used extensively in scholarly works, literature, and in the classroom.

Although the Oral History Projects received little attention throughout the Project's existence, they garnered recognition from historian and writer Bernard De Voto,

² Shaw, 624.

who may have been their strongest and perhaps only defender in the 1930s and 1940s. While most academics and general public remained generally indifferent to the thousands of pages of unpublished records, De Voto considered the oral histories “no less important than the guidebooks.” Writing in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1942, he expressed his fear that the material would be wasted, lamenting that the records had not yet been digested “or even adequately organized.”³ Despite De Voto’s efforts to draw attention to the oral histories, the American public and historians continued to largely ignore most of this documentary evidence in the decades following the 1930s.

As the Project concluded in 1942, staff gathered the thousands of pages of oral history material and deposited it in repositories across the nation. Most ended up in the Rare Books Division of the Library of Congress, while staff microfilmed a portion for research convenience. Project staff also published several books during and directly following the Writers’ Project tenure, such as *These Are Our Lives* (1939), a collection of Life Histories published by the Project, and *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (1945), a compilation of Ex-Slave Narratives published by B.A. Botkin. Compiled by Project administrators, these books primarily served as collections of sample interviews to demonstrate the usefulness of the Project, and often used brief excerpts from the interviews. As Project administration published the works primarily for public interest, these books showcased the Project’s literary achievements rather than its historical worth. The authors hardly acknowledged the possibility of the interview’s historical value.⁴

³ Bernard De Voto, “The Writes’ Project,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 1942, 121-24; Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 370.

⁴ William T. Couch, “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in

The American public paid little attention to the archival material altogether as their focus transitioned away from the Great Depression and toward World War II, and then the McCarthy Committee and Cold War. This disregard reflects a general trend in twentieth-century historical writing in the United States as both the nature of source material and the historian's approach to history changed. Subsequently, the material's reappearance in the 1970s also reflects the national trend, as American historical perspectives shifted to a "new social history." This shift occurred as the dialogue transitioned away from the traditional white elite and back to inclusiveness and a focus on the individual, or writing history "from the bottom up." Additionally, historians began looking at new resources and ways to document history, effectively awakening researchers to the potential of the oral histories and the interview techniques delineated by the Project. Scholars have since recognized the material for its historical significance, with one historian referring to it as "one of our most valuable links to this lost piece of our past."⁵

Historians largely distrusted the Oral History Projects throughout the first half of the twentieth century based on the material's initial sociological intent, collection method, reliability of the material, and nature of oral source material. The projects had

the South," 11 July 1938. SG022769 – General Information: Personnel Instructions, Works Progress Administration File, Alabama Department of Archives and History. Although these books were not expressly published for historical value, several states did attempt to systematically document the culture and history of African Americans. Most of these attempts, including the "Portrait of the Negro as an American" and "The Negro in Pittsburgh" projects, never made it to publication due to the Project's abrupt termination in 1939. Manuscripts for these publications were placed in local archives, and many were rediscovered and published in more recent years. Such attempts that made it to publication during the Project's tenure include the Georgia Writers' Project's *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* and the Virginia Writers' Project's *The Negro in Virginia*; however neither of these publications garnered much attention. While *Drums and Shadows* received few reviews and low sales, today *The Negro in Virginia* can rarely be found in its original 1940 print.

⁵ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, x.

sociological roots and historians believed its products functioned as such. The oral histories also possessed a distinct literary function, as administrators felt the material would be of “public enjoyment.” Furthermore, historians neglected the material because of the Project’s generic category of “writer,” rather than scholar or historian, and did not trust the work accomplished by an untrained group of relief workers.⁶

The reliability of the oral source also concerned scholars. Historians generally distrusted the interview process and understood oral sources as lacking objectivity, as the source depended largely upon the interviewer’s personal thoughts and attitudes. It also depended upon what the interviewer used in terms of questions, dialogue, and personal relationship.⁷ This push to use objective historical sources originated from the work of nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke, who appealed that objective documentary evidence should be at the root of all historical study. This notion remained in place until the second half of the twentieth century. Additionally, historians feared that Project staff may have heavily edited or censored sensitive information. This was particularly concerning in the case of the Ex-Slave Narratives, as Southern white interviewers recorded information that contradicted the popular “paternalistic image of the Old South.”⁸

Additional arguments with the Writers’ Project’s sources included problems with the sampling methods of the interviews, and problems associated with memory and time. The oral histories collection did not represent a completely random sample, but rather the

⁶ Tyrrell, *Historians in Public*, 180.

⁷ Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 70.

⁸ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 375.

Project sought specific participants based on background and occupation. In the instance of the Ex-Slave Narratives, their choice of respondents narrowed due to the length of time that had passed between emancipation and the Great Depression. Seventy years had passed and the number of former slaves had dwindled. In addition, statistics show that roughly forty-five percent of the slaves interviewed were under the age of ten during their enslavement, and historians feared their recollections of slavery may be dimmed due to their young age during the former era. On the other hand, those older than ten in 1865 were significantly advanced in age by the 1930s and historians argued that their memory could be poor. In both instances historians were skeptical that enough time had passed that likely skewed the interviewees' memories. Additionally, the interviewees' memories could be skewed by the collective memory of other slaves over time.⁹ For all of these reasons, historians failed to incorporate these oral history sources into any historical studies.

The period preceding the Great Depression reflected a renewed interest in looking at the "true forces shaping history," which included the working class and ordinary Americans.¹⁰ Contrary to the past writings on elite or "great white men," historians wrote about ordinary Americans to represent "a fair picture of the structure and working of society."¹¹ This growing social history movement, writing from the "bottom up," played an important role in the development of Oral History Projects. Additionally, the Great Depression brought about dramatic economic change. As doubt and uncertainty assailed

⁹ Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 534; Yetman, "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," 182.

¹⁰ Gilderhus, 94-98.

¹¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65.

Americans, scholars of this period, including Federal Writers' Project administrators, focused on the stories of the individual. While some of these works were scholarly, most targeted popular audiences. Scholars attributed this growth in works centered on the individual to the fact that people wished to "learn about themselves and about the life and times of other people" during this period of strife.¹² The Writers' Project's endeavors largely reflected this social history as they collected stories from ordinary individuals, former slaves, African Americans, and other ethnicities. However, the impact of World War II postponed the social history trend and subsequently obscured the achievements of the Project for several decades. Consequently, scholars and the American public ignored the oral histories meticulously collected by the Project.

World War II helped bring an end to the Great Depression, and as the economy improved Americans sought to forget the strife they encountered in the previous decade. Subsequently, a backlash against former historical writing occurred in post-war America. During this period writings contained reactions against the approach of examining history from "the bottom up." Scholars were inclined to agree that homogeneity and consensus marked the American experience, contradicting the conflicting and relativistic view of Progressive-era historians.¹³ Attention shifted away from the individual unless they were accounts of American elites. In the following decades historians focused on writing histories of collective groups, national politics, economics, military and diplomatic history, and American liberalism to explore the American experience. In doing so, they neglected the common individual and, consequently, the Project's interviews with

¹² Gerald L. Fetner, *Immersed in Great Affairs: Allan Nevins and the Heroic Age of American History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 67.

¹³ Gilderhus, 103-104.

underrepresented populations. However, social sciences continued to have an impact on historical writing, this time with the increasing use of quantification techniques employed in sociological studies. Historians determined that these techniques provided more reliable and verifiable results, and widely incorporated these approaches in their studies. Quantification methods gave rise to new areas of history, such as cliometrics, and subsequently historians had little use for the oral history interviews conducted in the 1930s.¹⁴

For scholars in the 1960s and subsequent decades however, scientific methods of history so popular in the previous decade brought detachment to historical inquiry and historians generally moved away from its practice. Instead, historians focused on subfields of history and largely wrote from the perspective of the individual. Emphasizing viewpoints from “the underside,” new social historians prioritized the study of formally marginalized people such as women, ethnic groups, and African Americans. Subfields devoted to this study included African American history, ethnic history, labor history, women and gender history, family history, urban history, and rural history. As the Project’s material focused on the individual and marginalized groups, historians studying these subfields began assessing the work accomplished by the Federal Writers’ Project.

Ex-Slave Narratives

Although the study of slavery was not new to American historians, the way in which it was studied, quantified, and written about greatly shifted in the twentieth

¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

century, resulting in a renewed interest in the Ex-Slave Narratives among academics. In the first half of the twentieth century, the widely accepted interpretation of slavery was based on the antebellum notion that slavery was a benevolent institution. Popular culture reflected and perpetuated this notion through films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Ulrich B. Phillips, one of the most influential and celebrated experts on slavery, dominated this interpretation of slavery and in his 1918 publication *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* argued that slaves benefited from being part of a patriarchal system. Depicting slave masters as the provider and arguing that true affection existed between master and slave, Phillips led and perpetuated this “socially acceptable” racism. He relied on evidence exclusively from the slaveholder’s point of view, such as plantation records, letters, southern newspapers, and other sources, and portrayed African Americans as passive, inferior, and uncivilized. Although some 1930s and 1940s scholarship attempted to counter this interpretation, including works of the Writers’ Project, Phillips’ “benign view of slavery fit with the notion of white supremacy that was solidly entrenched in society” and remained the widely accepted perspective amongst scholars.¹⁵

Until Kenneth M. Stampp published *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* in 1956, Phillips’ work remained the only comprehensive scholarly work on the topic.¹⁶ Stampp’s work directly refuted Phillip’s conclusions, and humanized the

¹⁵ James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8-9; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 10.

¹⁶ David Brion Davis, “Slavery and the Post-World War II Historian,” in *Slavery and Historiography*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 140.

slave. Although he used many of the same sources as Phillips, Stamppp also relied on diaries, journals, runaway-slave newspaper ads, and even antebellum slave narratives that included the slave's perspective. The marked difference between Stamppp's work and that of Phillips' was the emphasis Stamppp placed on the individual and the mistreatment and abuse of slaves. Defining the slave in terms of their victimization, Stamppp argued that slaves actively resisted slavery in various ways, contrary to Phillips' portrayal of a peaceful, paternalistic and benevolent institution.¹⁷

The shift toward humanizing slavery continued with Stanley M. Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959). Elkins also highlighted the psychological trauma of enslavement and painted a picture of the slave as a victim. The years of oppression, Elkins argued, destroyed the will of the slave and created an emasculated and passive "Sambo," one who identified and relied upon his slave master to survive. Elkins's "Sambo" caricature portrayed slaves as childlike, docile, dependent, and silly.¹⁸ This image raised concerns amongst scholars however, and in order to refute Elkins's notion of slave docility subsequent historians increasingly stressed themes such as slaves' rebelliousness and subtle forms of day-to-day resistance. Although controversial, Elkins' work raised important questions concerning the slave system, including how slavery affected the slave and the long-term consequences of the institution. These questions dominated the debate over slavery for decades as historians attempted to answer these questions. As a result, historians focused on slaves

¹⁷ Robert William Fogel, *The Slavery Debates, 1952-1990: A Retrospective* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 9-12.

¹⁸ Schwartz, 10. Slavery historians that contributed to this new scholarship include John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: the World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

themselves, portraying them “more as subjects in their own right than as objects of white treatment.”¹⁹ More specifically, subsequent historians continued Elkins’s path of examining the psychology of the enslaved, an area in which the slave narratives covered extensively.

An increased interest in slave history and proliferation of publications on the subject occurred in the 1960s, and continued well into the 1970s and beyond. Fueled in part by Elkins’s controversial work, the emerging modern civil rights movement and new social history also played fundamental roles. In addition to academic interest, the impact of the civil rights movement alerted the American public to the significance of African American history, along with and its tradition of struggle. Although historical consciousness of slavery and its background was prevalent in academic circles through the 1950s, the public held a level of relative indifference toward slavery and race until the 1960s.²⁰

Landmark equality reform such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act of 1957 no doubt impacted public interest in the historical background of slavery, but the true boom for black studies commenced in 1963 as the public observed unforgettable images of the Birmingham boycott, Bull Connor’s police force, sit-ins, marches, riots, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King. Amid the social turmoil of the 1960s, academics and the American public wondered how the country arrived at such a crisis. To unearth answers they examined “the roots of the racial inequalities that have pervaded and degraded American life.” This increased interest in slavery, coupled with

¹⁹ Peter Kochin, “American Historians and Antebellum Southern Slavery, 1959-1984,” in *Slavery and Historiography*, ed. Paul Finkelman, (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 314-315.

²⁰ Davis, 144.

the emergence of the new social history, inspired a renewed interest in the Ex-Slave Narratives.²¹

Historian Norman R. Yetman conducted the first comprehensive assessment of the Ex-Slave Narratives, and consequently any oral history work produced by the Writers' Project, in 1967. Yetman attributed scholarly disregard of the material, in part, to the inaccessibility and sheer quantity of the records.²² Although the Library of Congress made the bulk of the original transcripts available, the material was not available for circulation. Additionally, the volume of material was upwards of 10,000 un-indexed pages and discouraged scholars and the public alike to make effective use of its data. Furthermore, as the Ex-Slave Narrative Project garnered little media attention in the 1930s and 1940s, the public was generally unaware of its existence. The only real public knowledge of the Ex-Slave Narratives was gained from Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down*, which consisted of mere excerpts and carefully chosen selections.²³

Upon careful scrutiny of the material, Yetman described the collection as "one of the most enduring achievements of the Writers' Project," and evaluated the collection positively as a "unique and illuminating source of information not only about the institution of slavery but about the psychology of the enslaved." In addition, he argued that due to the large number of interviews gathered by the Project staff, as well as the composition of the sample of the slave population represented, historians would find the

²¹ Yetman, "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," 190.

²² Yetman also details historians' problems with the collection in terms of oral source reliability and method in gathering the material.

²³ Norman R. Yetman, *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections From the Slave Narrative Collections* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," 534-53; Yetman, "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," 181-210.

material a most useful source for their research.²⁴ Although Botkin published *Lay My Burden Down* in 1945, its purpose was to provide insight into the collection, reveal social patterns amongst the narratives, and present a meaningful literary display of slave narratives.²⁵ As the book's function was far from historical in nature, Yetman's article remains the first publication offering insight on the slave narratives in historical context. Subsequently, Yetman widely used the narratives in his own historical works on slavery, publishing *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection* in 1970.

More than 3,000 slave interviews afforded historians a unique collective portrait of a historical population. These firsthand accounts of life under slavery and personal reactions to bondage gave historians an essential data source, and they became increasingly important as new perspectives and models on slavery advanced during the 1970s and beyond. In 1972, George P. Rawick published his historic multi-volume *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, which made the Ex-Slave Narratives readily accessible to scholars for the first time. Subsequently, Rawick also located thousands of other interviews while researching his volumes and published an additional twelve volumes in 1977 to make a total of nineteen in the series, including a volume dedicated to the Alabama narratives. He also provided books of supplementary material that included various other sources on slavery in order to create a comprehensive composite of resources on slavery and slave life.

²⁴ Ibid., 534.

²⁵ Botkin, vii.

Historians soon widely recognized the importance of the Ex-Slave Narrative collection. In 1974 prominent scholar of Southern history C. Vann Woodward, made a convincing endorsement of the Ex-Slave Narratives in the *American Historical Review*. In reviewing Rawick's *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (1972), Woodward acknowledged that "historians have almost completely neglected these materials" despite being available to scholars in some capacity for more than thirty years. Although he recognized certain problems with the narrative's authenticity and quality, he firmly maintained that these suspicions did not justify their continued neglect. Arguing that most historical sources have their peculiarities, Woodward insisted that if historians discard the interviews they should also discard most other sources habitually used, including diaries, letters, speeches, and Congressional Records.²⁶

Although scholars still clung to concerns about certain weaknesses with the collection, such as with memory and possible information distortion, as historians scrutinized the collection more closely they realized a great deal of the information contained in them actually supported and agreed with the portrait of slavery already presented by more "reliable" historical sources.²⁷ Additionally, many of the interviews reaffirm the existence of the same conditions and indignities African Americans experienced as slaves. For historians, this "parallel thinking," or repetition in information and similarity of description, demonstrated their validity, and in the 1970s historians determined their inherent worth in understanding the nature of slavery from the

²⁶ C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," review of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* by George P. Rawick, *The American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (April 1974): 470-71, 475.

²⁷ Blassingame, *Slave Community*, 376.

perspective of the slave.²⁸ Historians found slave narratives particularly helpful in understanding the cultural and social milieu of the slave community, analyzing the social dynamics of bondage, and obtaining a portrait of childhood and family life under slavery, and widely used the narratives in works on these topics. Historians used them in combination with other historical documents to piece together the slave past, such as the more traditional diaries, slave records, newspapers, and letters. The only large-scale resource documenting the slave perception, slave narratives became one of the most important tools in providing an inclusive picture of life under slavery and the ante-bellum south.

Popular scholarship on slavery written in the 1970s reflected this new investment in the slave narratives. For instance, Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman integrated a great deal of information gleaned from the narratives on family life in *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (1974). Historians who used the narratives to reconstruct the cultural and social environment of the slave community included John W. Blassingame in *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1972). An important component in slave scholarship, historians used the narratives as evidence that slaves played an active role in shaping their own culture. Examples of this include George P. Rawick's *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972), Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976), Leslie Howard Owen's *The Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (1976), and Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness:*

²⁸ Stanley Feldstein, *Once a Slave: The Slaves' View of Slavery* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1971), 14.

Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom (1977). Still others used the narratives to document the aftermath of slavery and African American life during Reconstruction, such as Arnold H. Taylor's *Travail and Triumph: Black Life and Culture in the South Since the Civil War* (1976) and Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (1979). Lastly, a few historians made a push to make mass quantitative analyses of the narratives, as exemplified in Paul Escott's *Slavery Remembered: A Record of the Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (1979).

In the last thirty years historians have increasingly turned to the slave narratives as an informational repository. The collection has become one of the most universally cited sources on slavery, as it is the only resource that offers the perspective of the slave in such an encompassing way. Today scholars integrate the narratives into textbooks, academic scholarship, popular literature, children's books, and works on genealogy. Historians are also now using the narratives in new ways. No longer restricted to slavery, scholars have increasingly used them to study the Civil War, Reconstruction, Great Depression, Southern history, rural and agricultural history, and African American folklore.²⁹ Furthermore, they are also widely used in subfields of the new social history, including labor history, women and gender history, and family history.

The Alabama slave narratives routinely appear throughout important scholarship on slavery. Although frequently a part of the slave scholarship listed above, researchers often intersperse Alabama's slave narratives with those from other states, as the majority of historians incorporating the Project's narratives use the collection in its entirety rather

²⁹ Historians found that the narratives are particularly useful in studying the Great Depression; however, they cover many different topics. Many interviewees often took the opportunity to have conversations with Project employees about their plight during the Depression, amongst other topics. Shaw, "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression."

than focusing on one particular state. Scholars do often directly quote Alabama's narratives, exemplifying the value of the state's work to researchers and within the collection as a whole. One such example is the reoccurrence of Delia Garlic's story throughout scholarship. A former slave in Montgomery, Alabama, writers often focus on Garlic's story to illustrate the harsh abuse endured under slavery, the treatment of women, and the trials of being separated from family.³⁰

Although the majority of the Alabama narratives are used as historical evidence in conjunction with other state's narratives, historians have sometimes singled interviews out and published them on their own. Randall Williams published a volume of forty-four Alabama slave narratives in *Weren't No Good Times: Personal Accounts of Slavery in Alabama* (2004), comprising what he felt were the most compelling slave narratives in the Alabama collection. In addition, Alan Brown and David Taylor edited and published a collection of slave narratives conducted in Sumter County, Alabama, under the title *Gabr'l Blow Sof: Sumter County, Alabama Slave Narratives* (1997). Ruby Pickens Tartt's interviews comprised the bulk of the narrative Taylor chose for his work. Jessica Peterson published two significant Sumter County slave narratives in *Ex-Slave: The Narratives of Amy Chapman and George Young* (2008). The two interviewees, Chapman and Young, were slaves on Governor Reuben Chapman's plantation near Livingston, Alabama. Lastly, in the mid-2000s the Library of Congress's American Folklore Center published an updated version of all the state's narratives. The Center reprinted the Alabama volume, entitled *Alabama Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in*

³⁰ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*; Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives*; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South*; Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*.

Alabama from Interviews with Former Slaves: Typewritten Records (2006) in its original typescript, and includes narratives that were discovered since Rawick's 1977 work. Lastly, Alabama is well-represented in Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down*, as more than fifteen Alabama interviews appear in the publication.³¹

In addition to the Alabama narrative reprints, various scholars used the slave narratives in works on state history and local folklore. This is exemplified in Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton work *Alabama: A History* (1984), in which Hamilton extensively incorporated the Alabama narratives in her chapter on slavery in Alabama. Authors William Warren Rogers, Robert D. Ward, Leah Rawls Atkins, and Wayne Flynt also repeatedly refer to the narratives in the section on slave life in their popular and comprehensive state history *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (2010). Additionally, folklorists Jack and Olivia Solomon used numerous African American folklore examples found in the Alabama narratives in *Ghosts and Goosebumps: Ghost Stories, Tall Tales, and Superstitions from Alabama* (1981).

Growing public interest in African American history and culture prompted scholars to reintroduce and promote the slave narrative to a receptive audience in a variety of ways. Fueled with an increased interest in African American culture and history through the civil rights movement as well as the publication and subsequent televised miniseries of Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), the general public became fascinated with hearing the voices of African Americans telling their own stories. Haley, who utilized the slave narratives in his work, generated both a

³¹ Narratives used in *Lay My Burden Down* include those by Oliver Bell, Ank Bishop, Henry Barnes, William Colbert, Angie Garrett, Henry Garry, Mary Ella Grandberry, Jake Green, Caroline Holland, Josh Horn, Hannah Irwin, Martha Jackson, Hilliard Johnson, Dellie Lewis, Nicey Pugh, and Mingo White.

public debate on slavery and a significant popular interest in family history. African Americans especially became intrigued with learning about their heritage, and turned to genealogy to do so. In a *New York Times* article, National Archives research specialist James Walker confirmed that the growing interest in genealogy amongst African Americans was attributed in large part to *Roots*,³² while Genealogical Heraldic Institute of America founder and director John La Corte cited that “inquiries have more than doubled since the [miniseries’] broadcast.”³³ Like Haley, African Americans across the country found the Ex-Slaves Narratives to be a valuable resource for family history. Genealogists and genealogy associations promoted the slave narratives through books on African American genealogy, while the Library of Congress, state archives, historical societies, and public and research libraries promoted the use of the narratives as a resource through family history research guides. Researchers further promoted the slave narratives to the public through popular publications, exhibits and outreach activities, and in classroom curriculums and textbooks. Museum, library, and historical society staff all played an integral role in actively disseminating the narratives to the public.

Newspapers also proved a helpful medium with which to introduce the narratives to the public. Journalists not only alerted the public of the narrative’s existence, but also gave the public opportunity to digest the information they contained. In articles and book

³² Barbara Gamerekian, “Interest in Blacks in Genealogy is Gaining,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1976, 16.

³³ Philip Nobile and Maureen Kenney, “Congress Passed an Ethnic Heritage Studies Program Act in 1974 to Encourage Looking Backward,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1977, 150. The opening episode of the miniseries was reportedly watched by 130 million viewers, making this the third largest audience in television history. By March, it had the largest viewership. A 1977 poll estimated that out of 1,507 Americans surveyed, seventy-one percent of white Americans and eighty percent of African Americans had either read *Roots* or seen the series. *New York Times*, “Poll Shows Interest in Origins Growing,” 10 April 1977, 29.

reviews, journalists examined the background of the collection and provided the public with excerpts from the narratives. For instance, in a human interest story written during Black History Month in 1996, the *Mobile Register* published an article articulating the importance of the Alabama slave narratives. Quoting Robert J. Norrell, professor of history at the University of Alabama, the writer described the narratives as “the single most important source for writing about slavery from the slave’s perspective.” The article continued to provide the public with helpful background information, passages from the narratives, and suggested further reading for audiences.³⁴ Book reviews in local papers also played an important role. Although the public knew little about the original 1945 publication, the 1994 reprint of *Lay My Burden Down* garnered significantly more attention. In a glowing review, *Huntsville Times*’ Sue Cummings described the narratives as a deeply moving portrait of life under slavery, and deemed it “a valuable work of American history, guaranteed to enrich the lives of all who read it.”³⁵

Libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies reached the public through exhibits and outreach activities as an effective way of introducing the slave narratives to the public. One of the most widely recognized examples of this occurred at the Library of Congress, likely due to the immense controversy it generated. In 1993, American Studies professor John Michael Vlach published a book entitled *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, which drew heavily upon the slave narratives to recreate slave quarters and plantation life from the perspective of the slave.³⁶ Due to his

³⁴ Sam Hodges, “Slavery in Their Own Words,” *Mobile Register*, February 25, 1996, A1. Black History Month plays an important role in generating articles on the slave narratives.

³⁵ Sue Cummings, “Slaves’ Memories Shape Vivid Saga,” *The Huntsville Times*, February 6, 1994, H8.

³⁶ The title of Vlach’s book and subsequent exhibit comes from the Alabama slave narrative interview with

heavy use of the Ex-Slave Narrative and Historic American Buildings Survey collections the Library of Congress invited Vlach to turn his book into an exhibit at the Library, “suitable for libraries, historical societies, and college campuses.” By combining images from the Buildings Survey and photographs taken by Project staff with passages from the slave narratives, Vlach reconstructed a “detailed portrait of the social landscape of slavery” and plantation environment from the perspective of the slave.³⁷

The “Back of the Big House” exhibit opened December 1995, only to have Library of Congress officials promptly shut it down amidst cries of protest by over twenty Library employees who found its title and several of its photos offensive and upsetting.³⁸ Although its opening at the Library of Congress was a disaster, the exhibit garnered a great deal of publicity and drew public attention to the narratives. The exhibit was quickly moved to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library where it was shown without incident under the title “The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation.” Upon its opening, the MLK Jr. staff experienced an overflow audience and large amounts of enthusiastic and positive comments. The exhibit was considered a great success. The press illustrated the importance of the slave narratives, and described spectators who “expressed gratitude” about being able to freely view the images and read the narratives.

William Henry Towns, of Colbert County, in which he said “The Big House was a two-story house; white like most houses during that time. On the north side of the Big House sat a great big barn, where all the stock and stuff that was raised was kept. Off to the southwest of the barn, west of the Big House, set about five or six log house.”

³⁷ John Michael Vlach, “The Last Great Taboo Subject,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Louis E. Horton (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 58-60. The exhibit can now be viewed online at www.gwu.edu/~folklife/bighouse.

³⁸ *The Washington Times*, “King Library to Host Slavery Exhibit,” December 30, 1995, A8. The exhibit had been shown at four other sites within the past year without controversy. The trouble with the exhibit at the Library of Congress is generally attributed to the court case, *Cook v. Billington*, over troubling discrimination in employment-promotion practices at the Library.

One spectator, an African American man, stated that he was “delighted the library rescued the exhibit.”³⁹

Although the “Back of the Big House” exhibit garnered a great deal of national attention, it was far from the only exhibit to use the narratives in a meaningful way. In 1998, the Institute of Language and Culture in Clanton, Alabama, produced its own version. Entitled “Mansion and Cabin: Images from the Ex-Slave Narratives,” the twenty-four piece traveling exhibit consisted of photographs of Alabama ex-slaves accompanied by excerpts from the Alabama slave narratives. The exhibit told the story of Alabama slave history to Alabamians, with the opening caption reading “we get a sense of what their everyday lives were like.”⁴⁰ The exhibit moved throughout the state of Alabama, allowing the public to widely enjoy the story it told. In addition to exhibits, public programming also proved an important way for the public to learn of the slave narratives. In 2010, the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities Center at Auburn University highlighted the Alabama Writer’s Project through a series of public talks. Through a year-long series of discussions, lectures, and an art project entitled “New Perspectives: The WPA in Alabama,” the Draughon Center drew public attention to the arts programs of the 1930s and significantly highlighted the slave narratives.⁴¹

³⁹ Kate Mulligan, “Life on Plantations as Lived By the Slaves – Controversy Fades as Exhibit is Big Hit at MLK Library,” *The Washington Times*, February 1, 1996, M8.

⁴⁰ Thomas B. Harrison, “Ex-Slaves Live Again in Photo Collection,” *Mobile Register*, June 29, 1998, 1; Cherie Hicks, “The Stories of Living in Bondage: WPA Workers Interviewed Former Slaves in the 1930s; Exhibit is Now at Grove Hill,” *Mobile Register*, June 18, 1998, 1.

⁴¹ Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities, accessed at <http://www.cla.auburn.edu/cah/>.

Classrooms also became an important tool for the public. Until recent decades, educators had a difficult time identifying appropriate books that discussed slavery and African American history in the classroom. One of the more important texts today is Robert J. Norrell's *The Alabama Story: State History and Geography* (1993), a renewed history text for children. In his work, Norrell draws from the Alabama slave narratives, particularly from that of a slave girl in Sumter County named Laura Clark.⁴² Furthermore, in the last twenty years educators have routinely used the slave narratives as an important teaching tool. In 1992, the Alabama Learning Exchange (ALEX) published a document on curriculum content standards, the "Alabama Social Studies Course of Studies," that emphasized the importance of primary source documents in order to "enable students to visualize and empathize with people of other times and places." ALEX teamed up with the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) to develop teaching units using primary source documents, organizing the material in such a way that teachers could easily utilize them in the classroom.⁴³ In their unit on slavery in Alabama, ALEX and ADAH included the Alabama slave narratives, and stressed the importance of using "firsthand evidence of what slavery was like from the point-of view of former slaves," especially the unique and large-scale Ex-Slave Narratives.⁴⁴

⁴² Hodges, A1; Robert J. Norrell, *The Alabama Story: State History and Geography* (Tuscaloosa: Yellowhammer Press, 1993).

⁴³ Alabama Department of Archives & History, "Using Primary Sources in the Classroom," accessed at www.archives.alabama.gov/teacher/psources.html; Alabama Learning Exchange, "Alabama Social Studies Course of Studies," accessed at www.alex.state.al.us/browseSS.php. The Alabama Department of Archives and History also eventually digitized all of their narratives to make them even more accessible to the public, researchers, and teachers.

⁴⁴ Alabama Department of Archives & History, "Slavery Unit: Lesson 2 – Point of View of Former Slaves," accessed at www.archives.alabama.gov/teacher/slavery/slave2.html.

The eventual reassessment and subsequent use of the Ex-Slave Narratives in the 1970s dramatically altered both scholarly and public understanding of slavery. Historians now possess a series of documented slave experiences encompassing many different times, places, and personal experiences, allowing for a far more complex and compelling portrait of slavery. Prior to the 1970s, historians often exclusively examined the economics of slavery, the social nature of plantation life, and the slave owner's behavior and ideology. Rarely did the individual slave play an active role. Historians wrote about slavery using records from planters and overseers, diaries, letters and journals kept by slave owners, resulting in distorted views of slavery and often portrayed African Americans in a stereotypical manner rather than as human beings. In the 1970s historians began examining the slave's life and their experiences as slaves, such as their thoughts, actions, self-concepts, conditions, and personality. By utilizing non-traditional resources such as slaves' personal records, autobiographies, and the Ex-Slave Narratives of the 1930s, a true illustration of the inner life of the individual slave – their distinct culture, family life, or religion – became apparent. Systematically this new trend in the writing of slave history led historians to draw upon the wealth of material the Writers' Project produced, enabling the narratives to become a valuable source of information and insight which scholars had previously ignored.⁴⁵

Life Histories

Like the Ex-Slave Narratives, the impact of the Life Histories has evolved since the 1930s. Although the Life Histories began as sociological case histories, a shift in

⁴⁵ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, xi-xii.

their historical purposes occurred in the 1970s. With the emergence of the new social history movement historians focused on the individual, and subsequently reevaluated the usefulness of the Life Histories. Furthermore, historians began focusing on new areas of study that included labor history, ethnic history, women and gender history, urban history, and rural and agricultural history. As Project staff had commonly collected stories from these individuals as part of their project plans of work in the 1930s, historians began to value the Life Histories and incorporate those recorded narrative in to their own scholarship.

The first publication using the Life Histories, the Writers' Project's *These Are Our Lives*, included thirty-five personal stories of life on the farm, mill village and factory, as well as people in service occupations and stories of people on relief. Its editor, William Couch, chose these stories for the compilation because he believed they were mostly typical of the personal stories within these industries and therefore a good representation of the majority of the Life Histories and a most important study of life in the South during the Great Depression.⁴⁶ Although this "method of portraying the quality of life of a people" through interview techniques was a new practice, administrators made clear that this was a useful method that others should emulate in their own efforts in the years to come. *These Are Our Lives* generally received favorable reviews in 1939, with one reviewer describing its writing style as "remarkably good," and that the authors "demonstrate a keen and observant eye for gathering human stories."⁴⁷ Surprised by its quality, he ended his review with remarking "if the federal writers continue to produce

⁴⁶ Couch, preface to *These Are Our Lives*, xii.

⁴⁷ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 366-367.

volumes of this type their contribution to American cultural knowledge will be assured recognition.”⁴⁸ Armed with such positive feedback, Couch hoped to publish additional volumes from the more than one-thousand Life Histories representing people in industries such as lumbering, mining, and turpentine.⁴⁹ The Project unfortunately did not exist long enough to see this through, and despite favorable reviews scholars and the public forgot the Project’s Life Histories. These narratives, like the Project’s other oral history material during the first half of the twentieth century, remained mired in obscurity.

Couch’s goal of publishing another fair representation of life in the South using the Life Histories did not resume until 1978 with Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch’s compilation, *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties*. The emergence of the new social history movement of the 1960s and 1970s facilitated this rediscovery of the Life Histories collection much as it did the Ex-Slave Narratives. By then, researchers no longer used the histories as sociological studies or for literary pleasure, but rather as narratives of historic events. When read in succession, the histories Terrill and Hirsch present in their book provide an image of the South that offers, from the bottom up, “a view of part of the world from which ours has evolved.”⁵⁰

On a small scale, these individual interviews provide a more intimate description of family relationships, industry and agriculture, religion, and the “real workings of

⁴⁸ T.D. Clark, review of *These Are Our Lives*, by the Federal Writers’ Project, *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 26, no. 2 (September 1939): 287-88.

⁴⁹ Couch, preface to *These Are Our Lives*, ix, xi.

⁵⁰ Tom E. Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, introduction to *Such As Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties* by the Federal Writers’ Project (The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), xii.

institutions, customs, and habits” within the Southern states.⁵¹ On a grander scale, however, the stories demonstrate the impact that public events had on private lives, and offer a sense of personal participation in American history.⁵² Not only do the narratives record the history of the Great Depression and its impact on Southern families, they also trace race relations, two major wars, the New Deal programs, American politics, and class identity in the United States. Additionally, scholars have published more compilations since the 1970s, including such works as Ann Banks’ *First-Person America* (1980), which focused on Life Histories from the across the country, and James Seay Brown, Jr.’s narrower examination of Alabaman interviews in *Up Before Daylight: Life Histories from the Alabama Writers’ Project, 1938-1939* (1982). Both works contain a variety of Life Histories not yet published in previous texts and provided a further look into American history and life in the South.

With the emergence of subfields within the new social history, historians began reassessing the interview as primary sources and integrating these personal stories in combination with more documents such as records, diaries, newspapers, letters, and other traditional primary source materials. Scholars studying women and gender history, labor history, immigration and ethnic history, urban history, and rural and agriculture history found the histories particularly useful in their work. The Alabama Life Histories prove to be a particularly illuminating source on Southern life, and widely used by historians studying these and other areas of history.

⁵¹ Couch, preface to *These Are Our Lives*, ix.

⁵² Terrill and Hirsch, introduction to *Such As Us*, xv-xvi.

The 117 Alabama Life Histories produced by the Alabama Writers' Project cover a broad range of topics set forth by the collection manual. Consisting of interviews with Alabamians from the Tennessee Valley to the Gulf Coast, residents of cities as well as rural regions, and with people of all trades and backgrounds these stories are a prime example of what the Life Histories Project accomplished. They consisted of interviews with farmers, mine workers, cotton farmers, mill workers, fishermen, gardeners, college students, midwives, and teachers to name only a fraction of the diverse number of people and occupations that Project staffers gathered in the course of their work. Researchers have taken advantage of the interviews contained in the Alabama collection in writing histories on these individuals, and also in larger works on southern and state history. For example, Jack Temple Kirby used the Life Histories extensively to track agriculture and rural life across the New South in *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (1987). He used the narratives almost exclusively for his chapters on Modernization and Rural Life, which included studies on Southern people, communities and economies, women and their roles in Southern life, folklore, and race relations. Nearly half of his research is taken from the Alabama Life Histories. Kirby's work illustrates how historians typically use the histories in these larger works, and demonstrates the significance of the Alabama histories to scholarly work.⁵³

Other areas in which scholars have used the Alabama's histories include mining history, as exemplified in James Sanders Day's *Diamonds in the Rough: A History of Alabama's Cahaba Coal Field* (2013), and labor history, as represented in Henry M. McKiven's *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875-*

⁵³ Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

1920 (1995). Additionally, scholars have demonstrated the importance of using the histories to portray Southern prison systems and convict leasing, as exhibited in *Black Prisoners and Their World: Alabama, 1865-1900* (2000) by Mary Ellen Curtin, and *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (1996) by Matthew J. Mancini. Mancini's work contains an entire chapter focused on Alabama, and uses numerous quotations from Alabama's histories.

Alabama historian Wayne Flynt has been a particularly ardent supporter of the Alabama Life Histories and often incorporated them in his work. He used them at length in his scholarship on the experiences of poor whites in post-bellum Alabama, and believed that the interviews "constitute a major source on Alabama poor whites."⁵⁴ This scholarship includes Flynt's article "Spindle, Mine, and Mule: The Poor White Experience in Post-Civil War Alabama" (1987) and books *Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (2001) and *Dixie's Forgotten People, New Edition: The South's Poor Whites* (2004), all of which demonstrate Flynt's heavy reliance on the Project's Life History interviews. Flynt's experiences with the Alabama histories led him to write passionately and often about the common man. He credited the life histories as the catalyst to write on the topic, and delighted in their ability "to provide [the people] a niche in America's story."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Wayne Flynt, "Spindle, Mine, and Mule: The Poor White Experience in Post-Civil War Alabama," in *From Civil War to Civil Rights: Alabama 1860-1960, An Anthology from The Alabama Review*, ed. Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1987), 389, fn 25.

⁵⁵ Wayne Flynt, *Keeping the Faith: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011). Flynt recounts a story about the sons of Nancy Nolan, whose life history he used in *Poor But Proud*, approaching him upon his release of the book. Flynt had often wondered how Nolan's story ended, and with this chance encountered he discovered the remainder of the family's story. He learned of their successes, their sacrifices, and how they survived the Great Depression. As the sons told their story, Flynt was struck by how fortunate he was to be a "historian of ordinary people, to provide [the people] a niche in America's story, to remind us all that history is far more inclusive than we once

The Life Histories represent a rich vein of largely unpublished personal stories. In more recent years, historians began to appreciate them for their representation of ordinary people, and details on various industries and occupations. The Alabama Writers' Project gave voice to men and women across the state whose voices were not previously represented, and these portraits now play an integral role in the study and retelling of Alabama and Southern history.

Guidebook

Unlike the Oral History Projects, the guidebooks enjoyed a great deal of publicity upon their initial release. They earned public praise for their utility as travel guides, as well as their cultural achievements. All forty-eight states completed their guides by 1941, and in 1949 Henry Alsberg published his final compilation, *The American Guide: A Source Book and Complete Travel Guide for the United States*. Most critics in the 1930s and 1940s agreed that the state guides were the Project's most valuable contribution, and in the hundreds of articles reviewing the guidebooks most favorably appraised the guidebooks individually and collectively.⁵⁶ For a decade following their publication, the guidebooks served as the nation's only native travel guide describing the country in its entirety and became well-used sources of information with travelers.

Travelers relied on the guidebooks throughout the 1940s, and the guides enjoyed relatively steady sales among travelers, libraries, writers, and editors.⁵⁷ In the 1950s,

believed." Flynt, *Keeping the Faith*, 174.

⁵⁶ Mangione, *The Dream and The Deal*, 354.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 366.

however, companies such as Frommer's, the American Automobile Association, and Mobil started writing their own travel guides featuring up-to-date information for readers. The guidebooks of the 1930s largely slipped out of public view as their usefulness and relevancy faded, much like the WPA itself.

Nonetheless, the 1970s brought about several interesting discussions that led to the reissuing of the guidebooks. In 1973 the United States experienced the worst recession since the 1930s, and rhetoric became reminiscent of the Great Depression and WPA. In response to the recession, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1973 provided training and jobs to workers in public service. A second bill, the Employment and Manpower Act, was vetoed by Richard Nixon with the statement that it would "take the country back 35 years by devoting disproportionate sums for 'WPA-type jobs.'"⁵⁸ In 1975 Jerre Mangione published an article regarding the CETA's authorization and subsequent expansion in the *New York Times* entitled "It's Time for a New W.P.A. for Artists," which argued for government assistance for artists. In reviewing the Writers' Project's accomplishments Mangione called the guidebooks "monumental," and argued that they "gave the nation its first detailed self-portrait."⁵⁹ In addition, Mangione's 1974 publication of *The Dream and the Deal* provided in-depth detail to the Project's work on the guides, as did Penkower's in 1977. These publications brought public focus back to the efforts of the WPA arts programs.

In addition, events of the 1970s prompted a revival of scholarly and public interest in documenting local and community history, causing both groups to reassess the

⁵⁸ Bold, *Mapping America*, 197-198.

⁵⁹ Mangione, "It's Time for a New W.P.A. for Artists."

value of the guidebooks for historic purposes at the local level. The United States of America's 1976 bicentennial celebration served as nationwide catalyst in renewing interest in history at the local level, advancing the local history movement in the country, and subsequently reintroducing the American public to the guidebooks. The renewed interest resulting from the nation's anniversary fundamentally influenced the guidebooks switch from utilitarian purposes to an important historical reference source.

As the bicentennial approached, Americans immersed themselves in celebrations of the country and its past, and prompted nation-wide contemplation of American identity. This renewed focus on the nation's past urged Americans to learn more about themselves and delve deeper into the history of their communities. The initial guidebooks represented the first effort to document American history in terms of its communities, traditions, and culture. Project writers documented these respective topics in each state on a highly localized level by traveling the familiar roads of the state, visiting communities both urban and rural, and providing its populace with a sense that they, too, mattered within the broader context of American history. It took historians several decades to rediscover these guidebooks and the resources within them, but today researchers often turn to the guidebook as repositories of insight into the pasts of local communities and people. This is true of the Alabama guidebook. Like the other respective state guides, the Alabama contribution to the series serves as a record of the past, a history not just of the Great Depression, but of the attitudes and nature of a state and its people during the 1930s.

With the public revisiting the Project and its accomplishments during this period, many of the states reissued their original guidebooks. The Alabama reissue debuted in

1975, with updated facts and figures to reflect the Alabama of the 1970s in an attempt to serve as a functional guidebook for a new generation of travelers and researchers.

Another version of the guidebook appeared later, unaltered from its initial release except for a new introduction to place the guide in historical context. Publishers intended for this volume, entitled *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama* (2000), to serve researchers primarily as a historical document reflecting the period in which it was written and to act as a time capsule for both the 1930s and for the state.

A product of its time and the circumstances surrounding its publication, the Alabama guidebook suggests an amount of progress, patriotism, and pride that was common with the *American Guide Series*. The writers and Project administration sought to produce a travel guide that optimistically described the state as overcoming the Great Depression. The guide portrayed a state trying to convince the public that it is progressive and modern, yet its language suggested that the citizens saw nothing wrong with segregation.⁶⁰ However, its recognition and praise of the state's diversity was notable. The guidebook discussed race relations, poverty, and other challenges met by Alabamians of this era in addition to its history, folklore, and everyday life. It not only recorded the state's physical landscape and its political, economic and social environment, but also the psychological characteristics of its citizens. When combined, these descriptions offered a detailed illustration of the Alabama, and the people who lived there, of the 1930s.

The guidebook's history essays reflected the "accepted" view of Alabama's past, and justified then current attitudes and prejudices established through older

⁶⁰ Jackson, introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama*, viii.

interpretations of the past. The guide's information often overwhelmingly applied specifically to a white middle class, with its language representing the socially acceptable form of racism present in Alabama in the 1930s. However, while writers did intend for this demographic to use the guidebooks since they were the majority of the travel market, the Alabama Project made marked efforts to position Southern white cotton culture upon a stage equal with other cultures and groups that comprised Alabama's population, such as African Americans, Cajuns, mountaineers, and more. With these efforts, the Alabama guide recognized the importance of diverse groups as contributing to a common Alabama culture. No book on Alabama recognized and praised the state's diversity as the guide did, as prior to the 1930s social analyses of Alabama's population remained a neglected subject.⁶¹ The only comprehensive state history that existed before the guide was Thomas McAdory Owen and Marie Bankhead Owen's *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography*, which largely failed to discuss the different cultures found in Alabama, and in most cases neglected African Americans altogether.

As Harvey Jackson discussed in his introduction to the newest edition of the publication, scholars did not write Alabama's guide book. Rather, it was unemployed professionals seeking work who contributed to the undertaking. The resulting history was not always accurate and it was not always good, and writers sometimes downplayed events or did not mention them altogether in some cases. However, regardless of what these contributors wrote in the guides and what they left out, history is as much about what is avoided as what is told, and the guide stands as a reflection of the attitudes of the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

period. Because of this, the Alabama guidebook “offers more insight into the time of the writing than into the time being written about.”⁶²

Since the guide’s publication, authors have often cited it as a resource in scholarship on Alabama folklore, culture, history, and travel. This widespread employment of the guide demonstrates its enduring value as a historical resource. Although not focused on the state of Alabama, Andrew Wiese used the Alabama guidebook in his book on suburbanization and social conditions in *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (2003), while Jim Carrier quoted the guidebook in his *A Traveler’s Guide to the Civil Rights Movement* (2004) in reference to antebellum history in Alabama. Furthermore, the guide is useful to authors writing about Alabama communities, as demonstrated in Elizabeth D. Schafer’s *Lake Martin: Alabama’s Crown Jewel* (2005). Another important treatment of the guide is a resource for genealogists, as identified by Robert Scott Davis in *Tracing Your Alabama Past: For Genealogists and Others, A Detailed Guide to Alabama Resources* (2002). More significantly however, is its use in the classroom. Addressed as an important resource for youth in Rebecca L. Berg’s *The Great Depression in Literature for Youth: A Geographical Study of Families and Young Lives* (2004), Alabama’s guidebook is used as a reference and teaching tool. Today, the guidebook is found in most public and school libraries. Classroom activities planned by the Alabama Department of Archives and History use the guidebook to learn about cultural and physical geography of the state, and are implemented in classrooms throughout Alabama.⁶³

⁶² Ibid., xxv.

⁶³ Alabama Department of Archives & History, “Mapping Alabama’s History,” accessed at http://www.archives.alabama.gov/activity/Mapping_Alabama.html.

In addition to the oral histories and guidebooks, Alabama also researched and produced lesser-known pamphlets, booklets, and brochures about the state, consisting of titles such as *Alabama Health Almanac*, *Alabama: Products and Resources*, *Fish are Fighters in Alabama*, and various other short stories, historical sketches, encyclopedia, songs and folklore. Many more manuscripts exist unpublished in the archives, waiting for scholars to further rediscover the wealth of creative prose, folklore, and other texts. Manuscripts are still being discovered and printed, as demonstrated by the 2008 publication of Pat Willard's *America Eats!: On the Road with the WPA*, a manuscript gathered by the Project of every state's culinary habits, including material from the Alabama Project.

The Alabama Writers' Project produced a wealth of material documenting the state's local and community history, culture, and diversity. The Project's material received little attention after its creation, but became an important resource in the 1970s. Researchers used the material to emphasize the personal dimensions within their larger works. The collected interviews on ex-slaves and other groups in the state provided researchers with a more intimate look at their subjects and served as excellent sources of information with their first-hand accounts of day-to-day life in Alabama and in the South. Similarly, scholars often referenced the guidebook in their writings, as it offered the most culturally diverse interpretation of Alabama history through the Great Depression.

CONCLUSION

The accomplishments of the Alabama Writers' Project were possible with the help of a handful of talented and established local authors, aspiring authors, and various other professionals. The Project played an important role for these workers, as it offered opportunities for many to gain important knowledge of the literary and publishing world. Although some established writers used the Project to maintain their talents, many workers had little writing experience and used the Project to initiate writing careers. Regardless of past backgrounds, most of those who continued to write and publish following the Project applied new material that they absorbed about the social framework of the country into their writing. These writers ultimately stimulated the amount of American literature produced.⁶⁴

While the backgrounds and qualifications of the staff varied greatly, a number of established authors were also present. Writers such as Conrad Aiken, Nelson Algren and Jack Conroy were among those on staff, while writer hopefuls, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Margaret Walker were also present. Other professionals learned to write through the opportunities afforded by the Writers' Project, which proved a significant benefit to being employed by this relief group. Among these professionals were aspiring writers who acquired the chance to expand their skills and gain important

⁶⁴ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 373.

experience and recognition for their work, as they “rubbed elbows with published authors” and gained vital writing experience.⁶⁵ Although many continued with other professions once the depression ended, a number of Project personnel jumpstarted their careers and published works individually, contributing to American literature.

Through his experiences working on the Massachusetts Project, writer hopeful John Cheever collected subject matter for some of his best scenes in his 1957 novel *The Wapshot Chronicle*. Other notable authors such as Richard Wright and Margaret Walker were first published while on the relief rolls of the Writers’ Project in Chicago, and some maintain that without the New York Writers’ Project Ralph Ellison never would have written his classic *Invisible Man*. Furthermore, author, historian and radio broadcaster Studs Terkel learned oral history techniques while working for the Chicago Project, of which he utilized in his long running radio program as well as in several books.⁶⁶

Alabamians on the Project payroll also had opportunities to expand their writing skills and gain recognition for their work. Although several personnel hired by Miles were established writers and newspapermen, such as Covington Hall and Achmed H. Mundo, the majority had very little experience. Most notable was Ruby Pickens Tartt, who is known today as one of the foremost chroniclers of folklore, folk music, and slave narratives, and who was virtually unknown before her tenure on the Alabama Project. Tartt’s reputation for keeping notes about what she heard and saw in her chiefly African American community had reached Miles’s office in 1936, and Miles promptly offered

⁶⁵ Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides*, 20. This list includes names of African American authors and writer hopefuls as well as white. African American authors such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were able to get started in writing because of the opportunities afforded through the Writers’ Project. Douglas Brinkley, “Unmasking Writers of the W.P.A.,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2003.

⁶⁶ Brinkley, “Unmasking Writers of the W.P.A.”

Tartt the position of chairman of the Writers' Project in Sumter County. Following the demise of the Project in 1942 Tartt again found herself unemployed, but continued using her experience on the Project to continue writing and publishing folklore narratives and short stories until her death in 1974.⁶⁷

Additional aspiring authors reaped the same benefits from working on the Project that Tartt enjoyed, and time spent on the Project granted them similar opportunities to begin writing and publishing. Luther Clark, a young Alabamian from Sumter County with limited education, found work on the Project and was offered the chance to write short stories in addition to his work on the Ex-Slave Narratives and guidebook. One of his pieces, "Lookin' Fer Three Fools," appeared in the 1937 compilation of Project sponsored creative prose *American Stuff*. Additionally he sold several pieces to magazines.⁶⁸ Francois Ludgere Diard, a local historian and newspaperman from Mobile, established his talents and later utilized his experiences by publishing a book in 1949 based on an Alabama folk tale entitled *The Tree: Being the Strange Case of Charles R.S. Boyington*.⁶⁹ Scholar and college professor Wilson Heflin used his experiences as well and began publishing books in the 1940s. Most famous for his book *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, which he based on his dissertation and was published posthumously, Heflin wrote extensively on Herman Melville and became an authority on the subject. Jack Kytte, whose oral history narratives have been published on multiple occasions since the demise of the Project, had little to no writing experience prior to his time on the

⁶⁷ Brown and Owens, 12-16.

⁶⁸ Alsberg, *American Stuff*, 294.

⁶⁹ Brown, introduction to *Up Before Daylight*, 15.

Project. Using his experiences in the Alabama Project however, Kytle published a series of short stories that appeared in various magazines in the 1950s.

While many physical remnants of the WPA projects exist as buildings and structures, the Federal Writers' Project left behind something just as tangible in their books and oral history collections, as well as in the impact the Project had in the lives of the workers and the contributions they made to further the study of American history and culture. The Project had both immediate and lasting impact on America as workers maintained their craft, new material was presented to literary consumers, and historians discovered the usefulness of records of all Americans. They left behind a record of all American cultures, a more inclusive history, countless records for future generations, and a feeling of hope throughout a tumultuous period in American history. If not for the Writers' Project, scholars and the public would not have the vast and encompassing look at America that exists today.

Through the oral histories and folklore, Americans gained a clear picture of life during the Great Depression, including lives of common Americans and the experiences of former slaves. Although it took many years for historians to unearth these resources, this documentary evidence eventually became an important tool for historians in their quest to explore human lives, American history, and the impact of the Great Depression. In more recent years these resources have often been examined as important primary sources. Historians and other scholars have used them in numerous publications, and educators continue to use them in the classroom as a means to connect students with the history of our nation. Additionally, the guidebooks took Americans down familiar roads through its many essays and road descriptions, and comprehensively documented the

history and culture of 1930s America in the process. Although outdated in language and sometimes content, today the books exist as a window into a generation and time that has since slipped away. The Federal Writers' Project in its entirety, from the impact it had on the workers lives to the lasting value of its undertakings, remains unprecedented in worth, as it generated some of the most important advances in historical and cultural documentation of America in the nation's history.

Each state contributed to this national effort in a meaningful way. If not for the workers, most of whom were just trying to put food on the table, this vast and encompassing look at life in the South would not have been possible. In exchange, a number of Alabamians were able to jumpstart significant careers as authors, and further contribute to the growing literary talent in the state. The Alabama Writers' Project published a wealth of material to offer subsequent scholars, and the quantity and quality of the material remains a timeless asset to America history.

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