



Federal Writer's Project



Course outline

Date	Topic
February 1	Introduction
February 8	<i>The WPA guide to Massachusetts</i> and related publications Contemporary tours in central and western Massachusetts
February 15	Preserving Southern Black culture
February 22	Politics and the Federal Writers' Project
March 1	The Legacy of the Federal Writers' Project

Course materials are available on <https://queenlake.com/wise/wise-spring-2022/federal-writers-project/Bibliography>



The complete set comprises the most comprehensive account of the United States ever got together, and nothing since has even approached it.... [T]hey were reservoirs of organized, documented, and well-written information, geological, historical, and economic.



Travels with Charley, John Steinbeck



Federal Writers' Project - 1 3

Photo credit: New York Times - <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/books/steinbecks-travels-with-charley-gets-a-fact-checking.html>



When asked why artists and writers were included in WPA relief programs, director Harry Hopkins said, "'Hell, they've got to eat just like other people!'"



FDR Museum - [Art of the New Deal](#)

Federal Writers' Project - 1 4

<https://www.fdrlibrary.org/art-detail>

A note on research for this course

► There are several key resources for materials about and by the Federal Writers' Project

- The Library of Congress: [New Deal Programs: Selected Library of Congress Resources](#)
- Rowan University: [American Guide Series: The WPA Federal Writers' Project](#)
- [The Living New Deal](#)
- [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940](#)
- [The Federal Writers' Project and the Roots of Oral History Practice](#)

► Books for free download and loan:

- Archive.org: <https://archive.org/>
- HathiTrust Digital Library: <https://www.hathitrust.org/>
- Google Books: <https://books.google.com/>





- ▶ What was the Federal Writers' Project?
- ▶ Project Basics
- ▶ Themes of the Project
- ▶ The work that was
 - Planned and produced
 - Not planned and produced
 - Planned and not produced
 - Not planned and not produced
- ▶ Key people

What we'll cover today





Soul of a People: Writing America's Story by David Taylor



See also the book: [Soul of a People: The WPA Writers' Project Uncovers Depression America](#)

Federal Writers' Project - 1 7

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1560982/>

Note: video doesn't play from the PDF file, but you can click on the link to see the preview.

Timeline of the Federal Writers' Project

1933	Federal Emergency Relief Agency
1935	Works Progress Administration
1935	Federal Project One (Federal Writers' Project)
1938	Dies Committee hearings
1939	Federal Writers' Program
1942	Program Ends



Overview

- ▶ The Project produce more than 1,000 books and pamphlets
- ▶ The guides sold an estimated 700,000 copies.
- ▶ The effort to keep the price low (around \$2.50) for such large books caused tension with publishers. Handbooks were 24-40 pages long, included a map, and cost 20¢.
- ▶ Average employment in FWP from 1935-39 was between 4500 and 5200.
- ▶ The Project interviewed more than 10,000 people.



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Penkower

Interview <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/opac/wpalhabout.htm>



The Project initially planned only the American Guide Series, focusing on the scenic, historical, cultural, and economic resources of the nation.



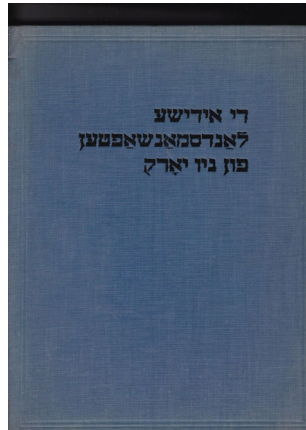
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America on the Road: The Family Vacation by Car

<https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2021/07/america-on-the-road-the-family-vacation-by-car/>

Few people, however, were taking leisure trips by car during the Depression (or, for that matter, during World War II).

Pittsfield, Mass. P 314 Massachusetts Guide



- City guides (New Orleans, Chicago, New York)
- Ethnic reports (Cavalcade of the American Negro, The Albanian struggle in the Old World and New, Di Idishe landsmanshaften fun Nyu York, The Italians of New York in both English and Italian).
- Stories of individuals, families, and other topics (Billy the Kid, Genealogy notes on Frisby family, Reading's volunteer fire department : its history and traditions)

State projects evolved, leading to the production of additional books and pamphlets



Federal Writers' Project - 1

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- Federal Writers' Project - 1 12

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Project employment

- ▶ At its peak, the Project employed 6,686 workers
- ▶ Writers were paid “security wage” in the range of \$100/month, although this varied by region.
- ▶ State and regional directors were paid as much as \$4000/month
- ▶ Other roles included editor, researcher, and general clerical workers



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See The Federal Writers' Project in Oregon, 1935-1942 : a case study

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3901&context=open_access_etds

Mangione, p. 9

FWP Employees

- ▶ Approximately 40 percent of the employees were women.
- ▶ Black employees made up two percent of the FWP staff.
- ▶ Other WPA projects were worse:
 - National Service Bureau - 0.8%
 - Radio Division – 0.013%
 - Administrative Headquarters – 0.006%
- ▶ Blacks were typically assigned to cover Black topics only.
- ▶ Whites could cover any topic.



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(Penkower, p 67)

Applying for writing jobs

- There weren't enough professional writers in Nebraska, but Lowry Chambers, a Nebraska University professor, brought in former students as new writers.
- Many writers in New York were reluctant to apply because they'd have to declare themselves to be paupers
- Declarations varied from state to state, but basically the applicant had little or no income or assets (~\$20).
- Every state except Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Vermont, and Wyoming had such a paupers' oath.



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Mangione p. 109

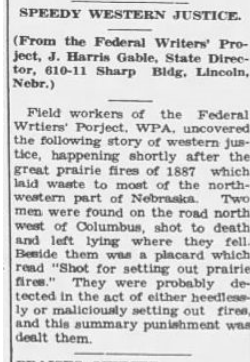
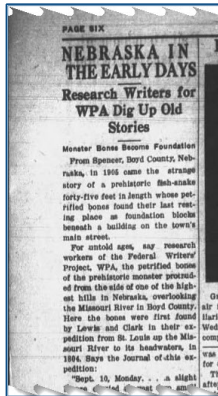
Mangione p. 157

[3] <https://www.congress.gov/75/crecb/1937/06/16/GPO-CRECB-1937-pt5-v81-20.pdf>

Authors

- ▶ Because the essays and tour guides are unsigned, it's often very difficult to identify the author of a specific section.
 - Conrad Aiken – Deerfield MA (Massachusetts Guide)
 - Richard Wright – Harlem (Panorama of New York)
- ▶ Several writers contributed research as well as finished material. (Richard Wright in Chicago and New York, Dorothy West.)
- ▶ Writers used their sustenance pay to be able to work on their own projects in the off-hours.





Alsberg encouraged state projects to communicate with newspapers to publicize the Project's work.



The Greeley Citizen, August 10, 1938, The Comstock News, June 23, 1938, and Pensacola News Journal, October 21, 1941

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Nebraska Writers' Project director, J. Harris Gable, created weekly press releases and at least 40 radio scripts to promote the project.[1]

[1] **Nebraska during the New Deal**

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=SB-4DwAAQBAJ>

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/352986588/>



How do we address an economic crisis?



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Workers, Plumbers, and Anarchists – Cristine Bold

ObamaCare vs. Obama

Infrastructure Bill vs. Biden

The Guides were more popular than the program that produced them

Seeing the work of writers as socially valuable labor

How do we tell America's story?

New York City writers



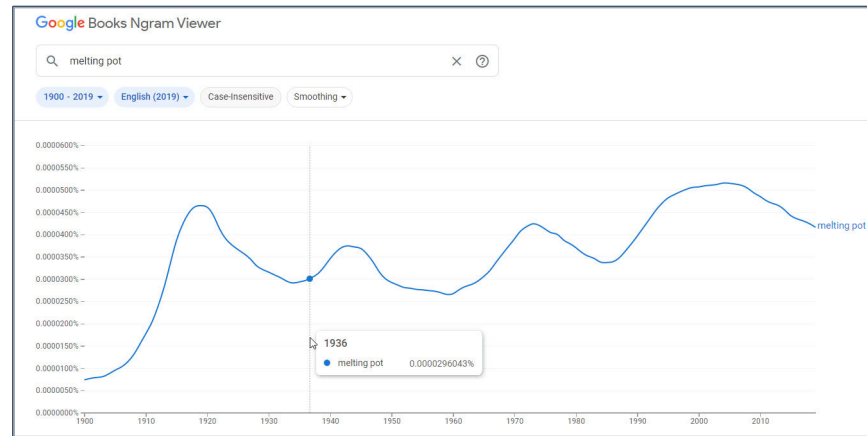
Theodore Ward, Federal Writer's Project employee

"I was going to the Pacific Coast and we happened to reach the Great Horseshoe Bend on the Great Northern. It's magnificent. If you've never seen it, you don't know what a tremendous spectacle it is.... And so I saw this and I was very struck by the magnificence of America and all of a sudden it occurred to me, "What the hell you lookin' at? This don't belong to you."

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Bold, Christine. *The WPA Guides: Mapping America*. United States: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.



Is America a melting pot?



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Or, is the melting pot an important concept?

THE LONGEST STRAIGHT STREET
Through the Melting Pot
City Tour 4

PICTURESQUE patches populated by foreign groups give South Philadelphia an Old World flavor. Phalanxes of pushcarts, some piled high with china and trays, with men's mittens, with pins and pencils, and Beyerle, others heaped with grapes and bananas and berries, chatter some of the streets. The aroma of strange viands permeates the air. There is the persistence of peasant folkways—weddings, funerals, and christenings conducted with all the ceremony which custom demanded in European villages.

South Philadelphia is the home of one of the greatest Negro populations in the North. The Irish, who have long been the dominant element in the section, are represented by an array of political organizations and athletic clubs. Until a decade or so ago, synagogues, bearded orthodox rabbis, and devout women in shawls and wigs recreated the atmosphere of an Old World ghetto.

A slice of Locust Street, between Tenth and Eleventh, is largely Greek. Conversations over the thick, black coffee and native foods at the restaurants may be in the idiom of the Ionian Isles. At Easter-tide bakery windows display bread with colored eggs baked, shell included, in the crust. A Greek workers' club, on South Eleventh Street, decorated in keeping with the Bellen's unabashed love of gaiety, is a center of activities.

The heart of Little Italy throbs at Eighth and Christian Streets—the scene of numerous gang murders in the days of prohibition. Streets are lined with undertakers' establishments, displaying elaborate candelin coffins, music stores plastered with brightly colored chromos of the reigning sovereigns of Italy, and poultry markets.

Week ending March 26, 1937. -1-

J. Edward Rice
Editorial Department.
Federal Writers Project Dist. 2.
WPA Project 2014.
Identification No. 0149-17374.

▶ Melting pot or not

Essay: ALABAMA FOLKLORE
Re-written by LEWIS HOLT.

Alabama has not been the human melting pot that many other states have been, hence its growth of tradition has not been colored by the beliefs of varied nationalities. Only three broad classifications need be outlined to cover the subject of folklore - Indian, Negro and the lore of the white man.

Melting pot or not



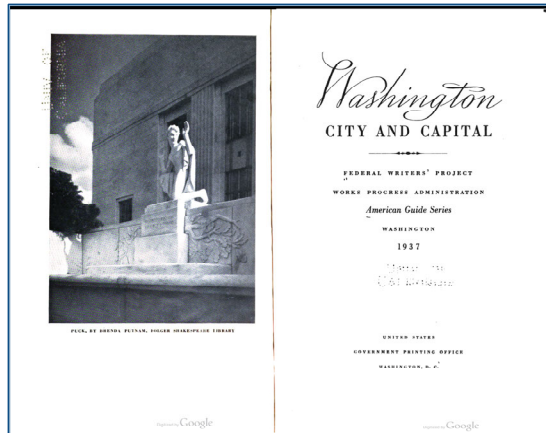
Federal Writers' Project - 1 21

“White immigrants” such as northern European
 “Catholic” immigrants such as French-Canadian, Irish, and, later, Italian
 “Jewish”
 East Asian
 South Asian, aka Indians from India
 African?
 South American?
 Cross-border relations with Mexicans and other central Americans
 Puerto Rican

See Ann Banks, *First Person America*

See [Jewish immigrant in South Carolina](#)

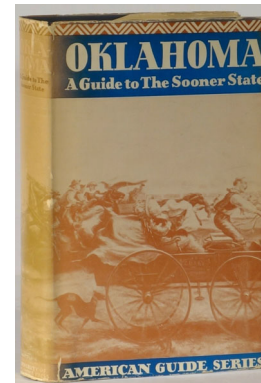
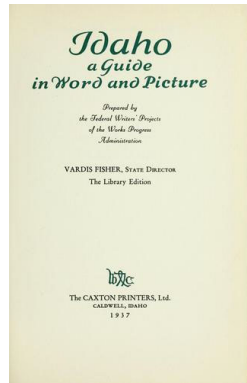
See Albanians in Massachusetts [Guides/albanianstruggle00fede.pdf](#)



The Washington, D.C. Guide was planned to be first.



Vardis Fisher, director of the Idaho project, had other plans



The first and the last



Instructions to Writers

1. Materials are to be collected on tenant farmers and their families, farm owners and their families, cotton mill villagers and their families, persons and their families in service occupations in towns and cities, and persons and their families in miscellaneous occupations such as lumbering, mining, fishing, turpentineing. Samples showing the nature of the materials to be collected are attached hereto.

2. The life histories may range from approximately two thousand words to ten or fifteen thousand words, depending upon the interest of the material.

3. An outline is attached hereto. This outline shows the nature of the subject matter which should be covered in the life history. However, it is not desired that each life history or story follow this outline in a rigid manner. The stories will not be useable if they are constructed on a rigid pattern. For instance, the writer may reverse the order of the outline, he may begin with any item which he considers of special importance in the case under consideration, he may follow the whole outline or limit himself to a part of it in any particular story. It is immaterial whether the stories are written in the first, second, or third person. Insofar as possible, the stories

4. Writers should not limit themselves to the types of stories shown in the samples. It is hoped that original modes of presenting the material will be developed. The criteria to be observed are those of accuracy, human interest, social importance, literary excellence. It may not be possible to combine all these in any one story. However, accuracy and literary excellence should be present in all. A story of some very exceptional family may be of great human interest but of minor social importance. The best stories will be those which combine all these elements. (By accuracy, it was explained in conferences, is meant simply write what you smell, see, hear. Writers cannot check on the accuracy of what is said. Get in the subject's own words what he has done, felt, and thought. If the subject's head is filled with wrong notions, foolish thoughts, and misinformation, if this kind of material comes out in conversation, record it. Let the subject's mind speak for itself.)

Instructions to Writers, *These are our Lives* p. 417



Typos presented a similar quandary, as we had no way to distinguish a slip of the typist's fingers from intellectual intention.

Similarly, we wondered if changes that were sometimes handwritten on the rough--typed manuscripts had been added by the writer or perhaps by an editor in the bureau office. ... [W]here it wasn't obvious to us who was speaking within a particular narrative we left the passage intact, as the reader's guess is at least as good as our own.

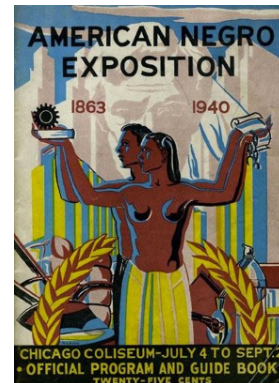
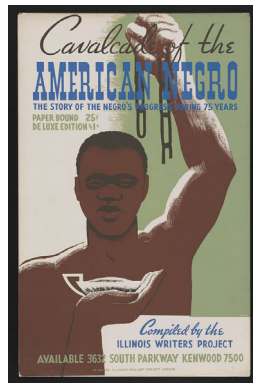


Editing

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Outlaws & Desperados: A New Mexico Federal Writers' Project Book. United States: Sunstone Press, 2008.

Outlaws & Desperados [\[Source\]](#)



Illinois Writers' Project Poster and Book. Published in conjunction with the American Negro Exposition, Chicago, 1940

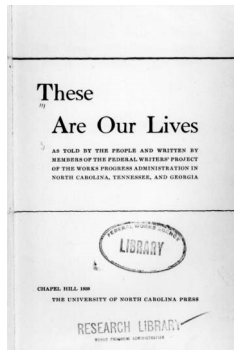


Federal Writers' Project - 1 26

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ds.10672/>
<https://archive.org/details/cavalcadeofameri0000writ>

These Are Our Lives

Reflections by the FWP writers and editors



"You're Gonna Have Lace Curtains"

You're Gonna Have Lace Curtains

JOHN AND SARAH EASTON, WITH THEIR SEVENTEEN-YEAR-old twin girls, live in a one-room filling station near Wilson. It was once painted white but now is a weather-beaten gray. The top bricks have fallen from the jaunty flue and the tin roof shows numerous patches here and there. The steps sag and the whole place looks neglected but clean. In the yard is clean bare sand but over on one side is a weed-grown flower bed.

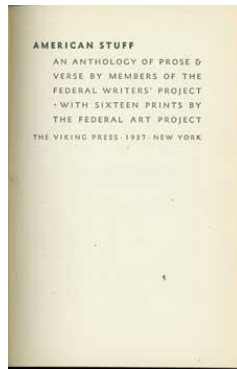
"Oh, you brought Amy home," said Sarah, as she stood in the door. Then she added, "Do come in, I'm not ashamed of our house although it's the worst we've stayed in since we was married thirty-two years ago. The main thing is that we hope to do better after next year."

She is a pleasant-voiced woman, big and strong with the brownest eyes one can imagine. Her hair is heavily streaked with gray and there are many tired lines in her dark face. Her mouth has bitter lines as though she long ago screwed it the wrong way when she was inclined to laugh.

Federal Writers' Project - 1

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A white farm couple from North Carolina talks with a FWP research about their lives now and their hopes for their future and their children's' futures.

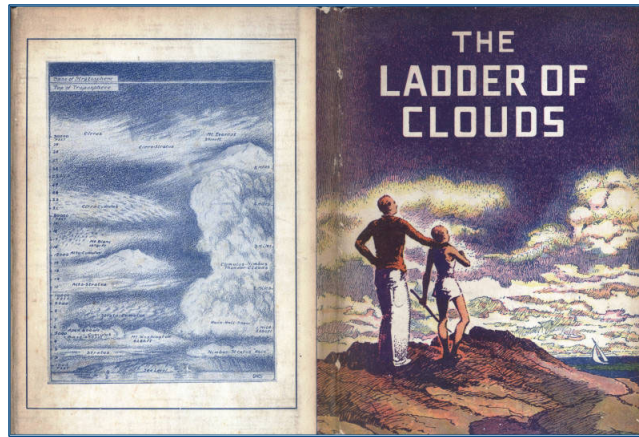


American stuff : an anthology of prose & verse by members of the Federal writers' project



Federal Writers' Project - 1 28

To borrow: https://archive.org/details/trent_0116400465955



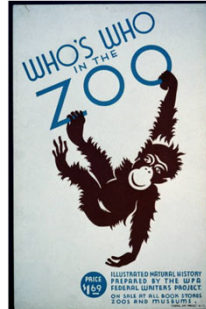
The Ladder of Clouds



Part of a series of children's science books

Federal Writers' Project - 1 29

<https://ia801007.us.archive.org/8/items/ladderofclouds00fede/ladderofclouds00fede.pdf>



Otters and Fish

To the Editor—In the Globe recently was a letter headed "Otters Don't Eat Fish." I wish its writer would get a copy of "Who's in the Zoo," edited by the Guild's Committee for the Federal writers' project; the material was taken from the records of the New York City Zoo. Turn to page 162, which shows the otter; on page 161 is a fine description of the animal.

This says the otter kills 10 times as many fish as it can eat. On land it hunts and kills ducks, chickens, muskrats, and other small birds and animals.

A few years ago a man from the West came to the sportsman's show in Boston and I had a chance to talk to him. He told me that fish was the principal feed of the otter and he had a hard time getting a supply. If otters don't eat fish, what do they eat? I did not see the stories by Thornton Burgess, but I know that he knows his stuff. I know from personal experience that a pair of otter will clean out all the trout in some of our best streams during the winter months. Ask any hatchery man, Federal or state, about the mink and otter. Both are killers.

GEO. S. PROCTOR,
State Conservation Officer,
Wilton, N. H.

Who's who in the zoo : natural history of mammals



Federal Writers' Project - 1 30

<https://archive.org/details/whoswhoinzoonatu00fede>

Unpublished works

- ▶ Several guides and other books were outlined and written, but not published for various reasons. Some have been incorporated into other publications by other authors.
- ▶ See United States Work Projects Administration Records, [A Finding Aid to the Collection in the Library of Congress](#) for a list of manuscripts and notes that remain unavailable in print or online.



Federal Writers' Project - 1 31

"Portuguese in New England"

"The Portrait of the Negro as American"

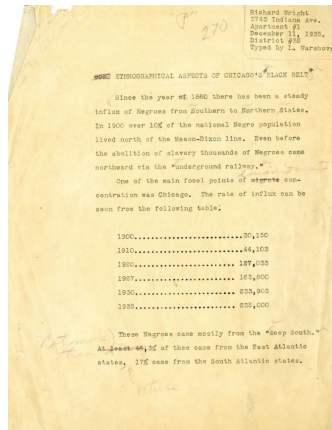
"Negro in Illinois"

- ▶ Research notes, transcripts, oral histories and original manuscripts intended to present a history of African Americans in Illinois from roughly the late 18th century to the early 20th century.
- ▶ The book was cancelled when the writers' project was cancelled in 1942.
- ▶ A collection of the papers, *Negro in Illinois*, edited by Brian Dolinar, was eventually published in 2013.
- ▶



Federal Writers' Project - 1 32

See [Illinois Writers Project: "Negro in Illinois" Digital Collection](#)



Draft of Richard Wright's "Some ethnographical aspects of Chicago's Black Belt"



Federal Writers' Project - 1 33

Dolinar, Brian. "The Illinois Writers' Project Essays: Introduction." *Southern Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2009).

<https://cdm16818.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/IIIWriters/id/9638/rec/2>



- ▶ Secretary of Commerce during the Roosevelt administration
- ▶ Architect of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)

Harry Hopkins





- ▶ Columbia Law School
- ▶ Correspondent covering the Russian Revolution
- ▶ Appointed as director of Federal Project One in 1935
- ▶ Called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in late 1938, he was fired in 1939.
- ▶ Continued to write about the Project, publishing a one-volume summary titled *The American Guide*

Henry Alsberg (1881-1970)





Katharine Kellock



- ▶ Tours Editor of the Federal Writers' Project and instigator and sole editor of the Highway Route series of guidebooks.
- ▶ An optimist in a time of bleak prose
- ▶ Kellock's vision influenced by:
 - the professionalization of social work
 - contact with the Soviet Union
 - the Progressive view of American history.

"The rulings of the United States Civil Service Commission furnished proof of the universality of the idea that a writer is anybody who can qualify for a place in a spelling bee."

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See The WPA Writers: Portraitists of the United States,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41204496>

Bold, Christine. "Katharine Kellock's New Deal Guidebooks." *American Studies* 29, no. 2 (January 1988).

Kellock quote: The WPA Writers: Portraitists of the United States, *American Scholar*, Volume IX, October 1940



- ▶ Sworn in as Librarian of Congress by Conway (MA) postmaster in 1939
- ▶ Under his direction, the Library of Congress Project collected and made available materials from the various WPA arts projects, including the Writers' Project, at the Library of Congress

Archibald MacLeish



Federal Writers' Project - 1 37

Librarian of Congress from July 1939 to 1944, resigning to become assistant Secretary of State

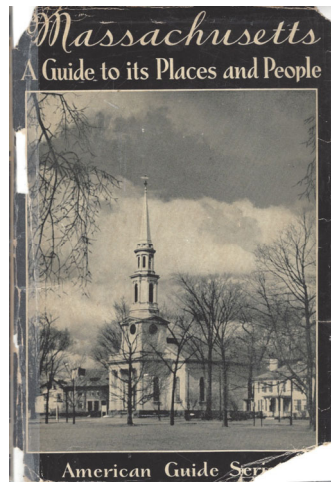
[\[Source\]](#)



- ▶ Bachelor of Laws degree at the National University School of Law (Now George Washington University School of Law)
- ▶ Elected to Congress in 1931
- ▶ In 1938, Chaired Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, later known as House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)
- ▶ Led investigations into Communist influences in WPA programs and other government agencies

Rep. Martin Dies, Jr. (D-Texas)





Week 2: Massachusetts – tours and other publications



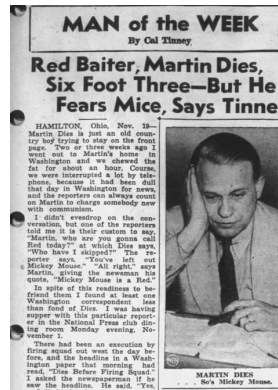


Week 3: Collecting and preserving Southern Black culture

Attendants at Old Slave Day, Southern Pines, and Nicey Pugh, Age 85



Federal Writers' Project - 1 40



Week 4: Rep. Martin Dies (D-Texas) chairs the House committee investigating Communist activity in WPA projects





21st Century Federal Writers' Project

"Artists transform collective experiences into indelible work that holds the power to heal us. Congressman Lieu's work at the federal level complements our efforts in the state legislature to strengthen the arts economy with the California Creative Workforce Act (SB 628) and Save the Performing Arts Act (SB 805). With this coordinated state and federal leverage, we can empower a generation of writers to capture and amplify the diverse stories of the COVID-19 pandemic."

TED LIEU

California State Senator Ben Allen

Week 5: The legacy of the Federal Writer's Project



Federal Writers' Project - 1

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When Congress terminated Federal Project Number One in 1939, the Federal Writers' Project was renamed the Federal Writers' Program and had to seek local sponsors willing to contribute funds towards the continuation of the program. They did, and the Federal Writer's Program lasted for the remainder of the WPA's existence.

<https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/federal-writers-project-fwp-1935-1943/>



Next week: touring Massachusetts

