

GENTREK: Works Projects Administration

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What is the most used part of any reference work? For me, it is the index. We've all seen historical reference books which lack an index. Without one, the location of information becomes tedious and time-consuming. When I think of useful indices in connection with genealogical research I always think "**WPA.**"

Created in 1935, the Work Projects Administration (WPA) was a federal agency to provide work for Americans during the depression. Also called the Works Progress Administration, this agency employed more than 8 million Americans during its more than 8 years of operation. Many WPA workers helped build bridges, roads, county fairgrounds, and airports. Other workers participated in projects that inventoried official records of thousands of states and counties, and created indices to important records still researched today. Its legacy to family historians is a wealth of information in the form of indices, bibliographies, life histories, photographs, and other historical materials.

We should be aware of WPA publications from the areas in which we are researching. In several states, Historical Records Survey Programs were formed as a branch or division of the Federal WPA. The program was to organize historical materials, particularly the unpublished government documents and records which are basic in the administration of local government and which provide invaluable data for students of political, economic, and social history. Archival guides were created to meet the needs of dae-to-dae administration by federal and local government officials, and also the needs of lawyers, businessmen, and other citizens who use facts from public records to conduct their affairs.

Other states had a state WPA, such as the Indiana Works Project Administration. While the organization of the compiling entities may have varied from state to state, any indices, surveys, and histories associated with the WPA are worth exploring. Some of these projects are fairly well-known, such as the Soundex Index to the U.S. Federal Censuses (1880, 1900, 1910, and 1920), and Soundex Indices to Naturalization Petitions in several regions of the country, but some of their projects were smaller and are lesser-known.

The WPA was structured into 4 organizational levels:

- 1- the central administration at Washington, D.C.
- 2- regional offices
- 3- state administrations
- 4- and district offices.

There are three WPA National Archives microfilm publications (Record Group 60):

- 1- **T935** "Index to Reference Cards for Work Project Administration
· Project Files, 1935-1937 (79 rolls)
- 2- **T936** "Index to Reference Cards for Work Project Administration
· Project Files 1938" (15 rolls)
- 3- **T937**, "Index to Reference Cards for Work Project Administration
· Project Administration Project Files, 1939-1942" (19 rolls)

The vast scope and mixed content of the works of the WPA make it difficult to determine what is available for a particular area, but there are now several sites on the Internet that hold material from the WPA that are invaluable to genealogists. Next week I will list some of the WPA based resources to be found on the Internet.

Public and Vital Records Guides

Guides are useful groups of WPA publications. For instance, the Guide to Public Vital Statistics in Iowa is only one hundred pages in length, but brimming with helpful information. It is divided into four sections: births, marriages, deaths, and divorces. Each section has a part entitled "legal requirements." Here you discover when civil registration was required, what areas of the state may have been keeping records before legally required to do so, and what county and state officials may have been responsible for these records. These entries also provide valuable clues regarding the unavailability of some records and other options to search. This section provides citations to the state codes governing each of these record groups, too.

There is usually a detailed listing for both the state records and county records following the important legal requirements sections for each group. The state records sections include specific information about what data was recorded on the record during the various time periods. It also tells the size of the records collection. The county records sections list the counties for each record group and describe the records kept by time period. There is no more detailed historic description anywhere else of vital records in Iowa.

County Archives Inventories

Another useful set of WPA compilations is the collection of inventories of county archives. These works are outstanding in their detail and often there is a separate volume for each county in the states where the inventories were conducted.

As with numerous WPA compilations, the general history sections are well footnoted. There is even a flowchart of the county government to help you understand the reporting and recording structures. Some might neglect this important step of context building; however, it is critical to successful research.

There are 45 sections that detail specific county offices and their respective records. Each and every office that compiled records is listed with a history of the office, a description of the records maintained by the office, and an inventory of each record group. You can find sections for the county clerk, court of chancery, and board of taxation to the jail keeper, and sinking fund commission.

Having access to an inventory of county archival publications can be a researcher's dream. These publications provide detail about the records that were kept and where they were housed in the early part of the twentieth century. Knowing the office to which a record group was historically associated can be of assistance when locating the records today. This is also known as **Jurisdictional Research**.

Religious Archives Inventories

To complement inventories of county archives, WPA workers in many states also compiled inventories of church or religious archives. These compilations could take a number of different forms. Along with the name of the church and denomination, researchers can find the church's location.

Miscellaneous Projects

In Indiana, the WPA undertook to index the birth, marriage, and death records for most of the 92 counties from the earliest time of civil registration to at least 1920. These books have become some of the state's most frequently used sources by family historians. These were compiled to determine how many individuals might qualify for President Roosevelt's New Deal programs. This is where I found my gg-grandparents' marriage as I related in "Beginner's Luck."

Another excellent program initiated by Indiana's WPA was a series of county books called "indices of names of persons and of firms." This project strove to identify all the significant published histories for a county and to compile a single-alphabet index to all the people, organizations, and institutions listed in each county's works. Only about half of Indiana counties were completed when WPA was cancelled to support the war effort. BUT the project was considered so worthwhile that the Indiana State Library and the Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne finished indexing the remaining counties.

Former slaves were interviewed in one of the more widely known WPA projects. Several volumes have been written that contain these valuable oral histories. We can learn about an individual's life, where he or she may have lived, and the families with whom he or she may have associated. Many of these WPA slave narratives were reprinted by Greenwood Press.

You should be aware of a couple cautionary notes when using WPA compilations. First, WPA publications for some areas of the country have taken criticism for their lack of comprehensiveness and accuracy -- a concern for any secondary or compiled information. How informed the informant or compiler was always impacts a publication's usefulness. Regardless, the quantity and consistency of the data make these WPA publications a must for genealogists.

Second, the WPA might not have compiled a particular type of work for every county in a given state. Counties were sometimes missed in the compilation of inventories. Remember, too, that World War II ended the WPA and its projects. Many WPA projects were far from complete when halted.

To search for the WPA's compilations, check the state library in the state you are conducting research. Since most current state libraries have a Web site, check for an online catalog to WPA publications. Some Web pages, like Cyndi's List, have direct links to all of the state libraries. These WPA publications can shed some wonderful light on the research challenges one might be facing.

Never underestimate the value of state library collections. In the few states that don't have a state library, check the resources of the state historical society. Or, check the local libraries in the towns and counties where research is being conducted, as well as major genealogical research facilities such as the LDS Family History Library, the Allen County Public Library, the Historical Society of Wisconsin, the DAR Library, and the New England Historic Genealogical Society.