

Putting People back to work: Government Funded Projects during the Great Depression By Jean Luddy

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn in a President in March of 1933, the national unemployment level had reached a staggering rate of 25%. To help those out of work, the new government created agencies to initiate projects that would bring jobs to communities across the nation. These “New Deal” agencies reviewed projects presented by states and towns. Once a project was approved, a grant from a federal agency paid for labor and/or equipment, with the town covering the remainder of the cost. Through grants given out by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and later by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), towns and cities across the country undertook beneficial improvements to roads, public buildings, parks and schools.

The Town of Vernon and the City of Rockville received a share of federal grants from the FERA and the WPA from 1934 though 1940. The War Memorial Tower at Fox Hill was funded by a federal grant. Other government projects from the 1930’s can still be seen in our town. Perhaps not as impressive as the War Memorial Tower, these projects were necessary public improvements and provided work for the unemployed, sustaining them and their families.

1934- Starting in January, the Federal Public Works Administration approved \$50,400 to repair roads, especially those from West Street to Vernon Center. The town contributed \$15,000. In August, FERA paid for the labor to install new sidewalks in Talcott and Central Parks, and to improve the sewers on Regan Road. The City of Rockville furnished the necessary materials for the projects.

1935- In May, FERA workers began a major improvement project at Henry Park. They cleared 49 acres of land, removing stumps, cutting brush, and raking leaves. Low areas were filled in. Land was excavated and leveled for a baseball field.



A stone wall, which is still visible today, was constructed in the park from the South Street entrance to the pine grove. A newspaper article described the project: “It [the wall] will add to the appearance of the park and prevent autos from driving on to the baseball fields. The wall will in reality be a series of small walls of stone, a foot high and about four feet long. There will be open spaces of about three feet between the small walls so that a person can walk between them.” (Rockville Journal 5/16/1935)

WPA workers constructed the stone wall in Henry Park that runs alongside the baseball fields.

In July, work began on organizing and indexing town vital records. All birth, marriage and death records before 1870 were cataloged and the old volumes were gathered into bound volumes for preservation.

1936- In February, a grant of \$5,000 from the WPA was used to hire local men to make interior and exterior improvements to the Tolland County Children's Home and to the Town Farm.



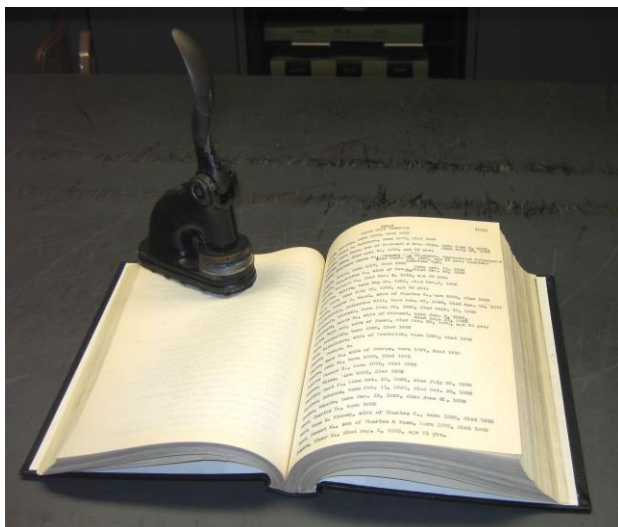
In July, surveyors funded by the WPA prepared a geodetic survey map of Connecticut. They placed several markers in the Rockville area showing elevations which were used for reference points on property deeds. This marker on the left can be found embedded in the walkway to the War Memorial Tower in Henry Park.

Meshing government procedures with town priorities didn't always go smoothly. By July 1936, the Rockville City Council voted to close several WPA projects. Councilmen were dissatisfied with the delays in starting or completing projects which cost the city money.

They felt that city employees could finish the jobs quicker and at a lesser cost. After meeting with WPA officials, the town agreed to support a WPA contract for sewer improvements. The WPA promised that the project would be completed in two months and that workers would work five days per week with the agency paying for supplies and labor.

1937- Sewer improvements to South Street were funded by the WPA. The project was estimated to cost between \$10,000 and \$12,000 with the city paying \$3,000 for its share. Once the project began, sewers running from Grove Street to Vernon Avenue were upgraded.

1938- In May, WPA workers began an inventory project in the town's oldest cemeteries, recording the names on the old stones and making much needed improvements. A newspaper article recorded some of the workers' apprehensions about the project.



“Some of these cemeteries have been known to contain many snakes so workers are looking forward to pleasant summer.” (Rockville Journal 5/18/1938) This compilation of 18th and early 19th century names and dates has become an important document for genealogists and researchers, since some of the stones have become unreadable in subsequent years.

This bound volume contains the names and dates of all citizens buried in town cemeteries.

Vernon officials sent a request to the WPA for a grant of \$23,000 to put toward the construction of a consolidated school in the section of town serving students from Vernon Center, Dobsonville, Ogden's Corner and Talcottville. The new school would replace an existing school and two rural school buildings. The plans for a new graded school would have 5 classrooms, an auditorium and a separate gymnasium. The petition for the grant would be finalized for submission by early 1940.

1939- Many proposed federal projects were sidelined for the year, because so much repair and replacement work had to be done as a result of the widespread damage from the Hurricane of 1938. Bridges and roads in Rockville and Vernon were damaged or destroyed by the storm. Many public buildings were heavily damaged as well.

1940- In May, the local newspaper published a review of active WPA projects. Twenty-eight men were working on road improvements. Voting booths in town were being repaired and painted. Two men were painting the East Street School. Vernon's land records were being indexed by two men and one woman. Building repairs were underway at the schools in Vernon Center and Talcottville. The Town Hall and the Henry Building were receiving hurricane related repairs with interior painting and the replacement of broken windows.

With the start of World War II in 1941, government spending focused on the war effort. Unemployment fell as workers went to war or got jobs in military related industries.

These government funded projects during the Depression paid for much needed maintenance or improvements in local and state infrastructure such as sewers, buildings and roads. These projects channeled jobs into communities and as Mayor George Sheets said in 1935: "We are putting the unemployed men to work and keeping them off the Town Relief." As the decades went on, these completed projects became part of everyday surroundings. As we recognize the anniversary of our town symbol, the War Memorial Tower, we should also be aware of other government projects that have withstood the test of time and are still serving our community today.