

Misclassified and Misunderstood: Reevaluating Works Progress Administration Public Buildings  
in Oregon's Willamette Valley<sup>i</sup>

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Formed under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), employed millions of unemployed Americans to conduct thousands of projects across the United States from 1935-1943.<sup>ii</sup> Developed amidst a period of tremendous suffering throughout the country, WPA projects helped to reinvigorate the nation's fledgling economy and instill a sense of hope among the populous that recovery from the Great Depression was possible. The WPA focused on providing as many jobs as possible while conducting useful projects for communities' active needs and future development.<sup>iii</sup> While primarily consisting of either construction or service projects, these projects included an incredible range of activities such as the construction of roads, sewers, and buildings as well as academic research, medical care, records management, educational and recreational classes, and the creation of art in a variety of formats. All of these projects fulfilled a need of the local community and allowed unemployed individuals within the community to maintain their professional skills to be prepared to re-enter private industry when jobs became available.

Although only representing a small percentage of the projects conducted by the WPA, the public buildings they constructed are often the most remembered and documented. Many have served as monuments to their communities, representing their partnership with the federal government and the work of local craftsmen and laborers. Despite the importance of these

projects to local communities, research indicates a dearth of documentation and analysis of these resources in Oregon. Studies have been conducted examining the impact of the New Deal in Oregon and specific resources like Timberline Lodge, but no easily accessible comprehensive list of these resources has been formed.<sup>iv</sup>

As part of a terminal project for the completion of a M.S. degree in historic preservation from the University of Oregon, intensive level surveys of WPA public buildings and structures were conducted in the cities of Eugene, Salem, and Portland, Oregon. The selected resources were based on those previously identified in other surveys and WPA publications. Within these three cities six resources were identified with four in Portland and one each in Salem and Eugene. In review of publicly available sources it appears that a substantial number of WPA buildings and structures have been undocumented in these cities as well as throughout the state. As part of his research on WPA projects in Portland, Neil Barker identified 11 buildings and structures as well other construction projects conducted in the city.<sup>v</sup> For his research, he reviewed the final WPA records stored at the National Archives and Records Administration, which is the most comprehensive list of these resources known. Based on his findings, it would be expected that additional WPA constructed buildings and structures would be located in the state, particularly in Eugene and Salem. Furthermore, a 1938 publication from the Oregon WPA reported that 88 public buildings had been constructed and 145 more had been repaired within the state.<sup>vi</sup> While in operation until 1943 and with expenditures of approximately 7.7 – 14.4 million dollars per year in Oregon between 1939 and 1942, it is expected that substantially more public buildings were constructed during that time.<sup>vii</sup>

The multitude of undocumented WPA buildings in the state limits our understanding of the effect of the WPA in the state and the importance of these resources to individual

communities. Apart from a lack of understanding the breadth of the WPA in Oregon, research indicates an issue with the misclassification of WPA buildings as well. This misclassification primarily involves confusion between the work of the WPA with other New Deal agencies such as the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), but also includes inappropriately crediting the work of the WPA with other New Deal era buildings.

In review of the Oregon Historic Sites Database, the listing of WPA structures appears to include multiple errors, depending on how “WPA structures” was defined by the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office at the time.<sup>viii</sup> Examples of misclassifications include the University of Oregon Library which was constructed by the PWA with interior work completed by the WPA and the Portland Municipal Airport whose site was prepared by the WPA. The Macleay Park Comfort Station (1929) is also included and the only known association with the WPA is that they developed several trails and some smaller utilitarian buildings within the park.<sup>ix</sup> The Portland Art Museum is also included on this list, but the only known association with the WPA is that it houses some pieces of WPA artwork. Other misclassifications have occurred in an academic article, online publications, city records, and with public historians.<sup>x</sup> All of these misclassifications appear to be the result of a lack of understanding of the differences between the WPA and other New Deal agencies, and the involvement of multiple agencies in one project.

The identification, documentation and analysis of WPA construction projects appears to have been greatly aided by their physical representation. Due to their physical nature, construction projects have received greater attention and documentation than service projects such as classes taught, books repaired, and research conducted. However, there remains a lack of understanding and attribution of the range of WPA construction projects in the state despite significant expenditures by the WPA and local sponsors. More than 76 million dollars was spent

on construction projects in the state between 1935 and 1943. Approximately 8 million was appropriated for airports and airways, 7.7 million for buildings, 5.7 million on conservation, 37.9 million on highways, roads and streets, 4.3 million on recreational facilities, and 8.3 million on water and sewer systems and other utilities.<sup>xi</sup>

Although critical to the development of local communities and the state, many WPA construction projects have not been remembered. The WPA was responsible for the construction of important transportation corridors such as Oregon Route 126 between Eugene and Florence and Portland's Sunset Highway (Oregon Route 26), but few people understand the historical significance of these projects today. The most remembered projects are the larger buildings constructed by the WPA such as Timberline Lodge, Oregon State Forester's Office Building, and Eugene's Civic Stadium, which have all been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Lesser known buildings include the Oregon Ceramic Studio, Overlook Park Shelter and Comfort Station, Peninsula School Auditorium and Gymnasium, and the Jefferson High School Stadium, all of which are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

It is these smaller, less-recognized buildings that are believed to be the more common and less identified and analyzed projects. Although less documented, these buildings are important to understanding the overall impact of the WPA on Oregon as well as on the individual communities. The Oregon Ceramic Studio was developed under the leadership of Lydia Herrick Hodge and the University of Oregon Alumni Art League. When completed in 1937 it was the first local art venue organized in Portland since 1907.<sup>xii</sup> Designed by Ellis Lawrence in the Art Deco style, the Oregon Ceramic Studio emerged as a regional institution for the development and exhibition of craft as well as the education of the community particularly local children.<sup>xiii</sup> The construction of the Overlook Park Shelter and Comfort Station in 1939 was the result of a

community-based effort to transform a city landfill into a public park.<sup>xiv</sup> It is also the only-identified National Park-style building designed by Ellis Lawrence.<sup>xv</sup> It has continued to serve the Overlook neighborhood and greater Portland community since its original construction. Both the Peninsula School Auditorium and Gymnasium and the Jefferson High School Stadium, were developed as part of a partnership with the Portland Public School District to provide needed school resources and improvements to existing resources that would not have been possible without the labor provided by the WPA.<sup>xvi</sup>



Oregon Ceramic Studio (1937)



Overlook Park Shelter and Comfort Station (1939)



Peninsula School Auditorium & Gymnasium (1941)



Jefferson High School Stadium (1941)

The WPA public buildings and structures identified in the cities of Eugene, Salem, and Portland represent the diversity of building types constructed by the WPA and their uniqueness

from other New Deal agency projects. The PWA which provided grants to states to hire private firms to conduct construction projects was responsible for projects such as the Oregon State Capitol, Oregon State Library and Salem High School. PWA projects were often larger, more detailed, and featured more expensive materials than WPA buildings.<sup>xvii</sup> Although primarily focused on conservation efforts and the development of roads, trails and building sites, the CCC was also responsible for the construction of some buildings, but these were more often small and utilitarian as CCC workers were generally unskilled laborers. Because the WPA was a temporary program, allocated funds on a yearly basis, and primarily only covered labor costs, buildings were generally smaller, featured less-expensive materials, and were completed over a smaller amount of time.

Results from recently conducted intensive level surveys document the historical significance of the identified WPA constructed buildings and structures in Eugene, Salem, and Portland. Through the process of researching these resources it became increasingly more apparent that there is a significant void in the documentation of these resources in these cities and the state. This lack of documentation limits the ability to understand the effect of the WPA in Oregon, the resources they constructed, and the impact of these resources to individual communities. Furthermore, the misclassification of WPA projects has caused confusion to its impact, the effect of other New Deal agencies on the state, and the unique differences between New Deal relief programs. Further documentation and analysis of WPA projects throughout the state is necessary to truly understand the breadth of the projects conducted and how they differentiate from other New Deal projects. The WPA represents the culmination of the federal government's experiment in providing relief during a chaotic period of incredible suffering across the country. The projects they conducted drastically changed the built environment and

the development of countless communities. However, in Oregon we only have an undeveloped picture of the program's impact on the state.

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<sup>i</sup> This paper draws from research associated with a terminal project that conducted intensive level surveys on WPA public buildings and structures in the cities of Eugene, Salem, and Portland, Oregon for the University of Oregon Historic Preservation Department. For more details on this research see Timothy W. Wood, "Romanticized and Misunderstood: Surveying Works Progress Administration Public Buildings and Structures in Oregon's Willamette Valley," master's thesis (Portland: University of Oregon, 2018).

<sup>ii</sup> Nancy E. Rose, *Put to Work Relief Programs of the Great Depression* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 111. The Works Progress Administration was renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939 in response to concerns over the perception of the creation of jobs with little work associated with it.

<sup>iii</sup> Neil Barker, "Portland's Works Progress Administration," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2000): 417. Construction jobs favored the use of hand tools over machinery to increase the number of positions needed.

<sup>iv</sup> The only known comprehensive list of these resources is the final records composed by the WPA, which are held in the National Archives and Records Administration. Known scholarly articles related to the New Deal in Oregon include: Sarah B. Munro, "The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the New Deal: Oregon's Legacy," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 109, no. 2 (2008): 304-311; William G. Robbins, "Surviving the Great Depression the New Deal in Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 109, no. 2 (2008): 311-317; and Neil Barker, "Portland's Works Progress Administration"

<sup>v</sup> Neil Barker, "The Works Progress Administration in Portland, Oregon: An Historical Narrative and Survey Report, 1935-1942" master's thesis (Pullman: Washington State University, 1996). The other five buildings he identified in his research were not easily accessible or used by the public so they were not considered a "public building" for this research.

<sup>vi</sup> Oregon Works Progress Administration, *Works Progress Administration in Oregon* (Portland: Oregon Works Progress Administration, 1938). The number of buildings constructed and repaired were categorized by county so it was not possible to determine the exact location of the projects.

<sup>vii</sup> United States Federal Works Agency, *Final Report on the WPA Program 1935-1943* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 120.

<sup>viii</sup> Oregon State Historic Preservation Office, *Oregon Historic Sites Database*, <http://heritagedata.prd.state.or.us/historic/> (accessed March 31, 2018).

<sup>ix</sup> Barker, "The Works Progress Administration in Portland, Oregon."

<sup>x</sup> Robbins; Kristin Straus, e-mail message to author, January 31, 2018; The Living New Deal, *West Salem City Hall (Former) – Salem OR*, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/old-west-salem-city-hall-salem/> (accessed April 1, 2018); Marvin James Sannes, West Salem City Hall National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1990). In William G. Robbins' "Surviving the Great Depression the New Deal in Oregon" he misclassified the Oregon Coast Highway bridge system as a WPA project rather than a PWA project. In communications with the city of Salem about their WPA resources, the author was provided with a list of believed to be WPA buildings, that were all PWA projects. A review of The Living New Deal website that documents New Deal projects, the West Salem City Hall was listed as a WPA project, but in review of the National Register of Historic Places nomination, there is no clear association between the WPA and the construction of the building. In correspondence with tour guides at the Oregon State Capitol, the author was informed that the building as well as other government buildings in the area were all constructed by the WPA.

<sup>xi</sup> United States Federal Works Agency, 126-127.

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<sup>xii</sup> Museum of Contemporary Craft, *Unpacking the Collection: Selections from the Museum of Contemporary Craft* (Portland: Museum of Contemporary Craft, 2008), 8. No new local art venue had been organized in Portland since Julia Hoffman formed the Arts and Crafts Society in 1907.

<sup>xiii</sup> Museum of Contemporary Craft, *Unpacking the Collection*, 15; Richard Ritz, *Architects of Oregon: A Biographical Dictionary of Architects Deceased – 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Portland: Lair Hill, 2002): 242-243. Ellis Lawrence was an active architect in Portland for 40 years. He also founded the University of Oregon School of Architecture and Allied Arts in 1914 and served as its first Dean from 1914 to 1946. Lawrence's architectural practice was responsible for more than 500 designs, including residential, commercial, and educational buildings.

<sup>xiv</sup> "Parks to Get Land," *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), September 30, 1929; "Plea Made for City Help," *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), January 15, 1931; "More Parks Envisaged Action of Voters Might Facilitate Development Work," *Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, OR), September 4, 1932.

<sup>xv</sup> Michael Shellenbarger and Kimberly K. Lakin, *Ellis Lawrence Building Survey*, <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/2150> (accessed April 1, 2018).

<sup>xvi</sup> "Portland School Buildings in Spick and Span Order," *Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, OR), Sept. 1, 1940; "Athletic Field Rites Slated," *Oregonian* (Portland, OR), Oct. 10, 1941.

<sup>xvii</sup> Works Progress Administration, *Inventory: An Appraisal of Results of the Works Progress Administration* (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1938), 4.