

Brother Can You Spare A Dime?

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“I just want to put men to work. I don’t give a damn if they dig a hole one day and fill it the next. I want them working.”

Such were the words of Works Progress Administration (WPA) director Harry L. Hopkins in 1936.

Hopkins was a top advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt, and was a key architect in the WPA, acted as its director from May 1933 through December 1938, and helped bring about other New Deal plans

The Great Depression followed the stock market crash of 1929 and left many people out of work. Businesses shut down and poverty was widespread.

The number of people applying for public assistance sky rocketed as long food lines and monetary handouts from the government became routine.

Hopkins felt that this handout, known as the “dole,” was psychologically insufficient, even though the money was needed.



WPA construction at Fort Monmouth in 1938. Squier Hall, in the background, was also part of this building effort.

Songs from the Great Depression reflect that the indignity of receiving the handouts were often as bad as needing them in the first place.

People who previously held jobs and supported themselves and their families felt even worse about their situation when they had to accept food or a dole.

Two of the lines from from the 1931 song "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," attest to this: “They used to tell me I was building a dream, with peace and glory ahead / Why should I be standing in line, just waiting for bread?”

Hopkins’ solution to this was the

New Deal.

President Hoover's administration had a small work-relief program, and Hopkins decided to not only continue this, but expand it.

The New Deal was a series of federal programs to provide much-needed employment and income to Americans during the Great Depression.

The Works Progress Administration was a Federal agency that cooperated with State and local governments in carrying out needed public improvements and services, in order to provide work and wages for the needy, able-bodied unemployed.

The local governments planned and sponsored the projects, and the WPA helped to fund and operate them.

Those eligible for WPA employment were required to meet a means test in order to qualify for work relief.



Men worked on laying pipes for a WPA building project at Fort Monmouth, 1938.

About 85% of the funds spent on WPA programs went directly into wages and salaries. This agency employed millions of artists, skilled and unskilled laborers, those with technical skills, and built many public works.

This gigantic undertaking was inevitably accompanied by confusion, waste, and political favoritism.

Despite the inevitable problems, the 'pump-priming' effect stimulated private business during the depression years and inaugurated reforms that states had been unable to subsidize.

The New York Times reported that 341 Monmouth County citizens were taken off of the dole due to the WPA.

Fort Monmouth received Works Progress Administration funds.

Though the 1929 the Signal Corps consolidation made it the hub of Signal Corps activity in the country, there was still problems with unemployment in New Jersey.

At the same time, major construction was needed as Fort Monmouth continued to gain soldiers and civilians.

Construction and design was under the jurisdiction of the Quartermaster Corps. The Quartermaster Corps hallmark was the delivery of high quality construction at low cost.

This construction consisted of substantial concrete and brick structures, Georgian Revival in style, with the notable exceptions of Russel Hall and Squier Hall, both modern buildings.

The final phase of the pre-war permanent construction program was completed between 1934 and 1936 under the WPA.

Eleven double sets of NCO Quarters were completed, along with the west wing of the hospital and an addition to its north end, in 1934.

A blacksmith shop, incinerator, bakery, band barracks, and utilities shops were also completed in 1934.

The following year saw the completion of the fire station and guardhouse, Squier Hall, three sets of quarters for field officers, and four sets for company grade officers.

Several other utilitarian structures were also built during this period.

Hunter stated in a conference held 2 February 1942, "We (the WPA) have been working pretty close to the Army and Navy for the last seven years... We have probably spent, since the beginning of WPA, close to a billion dollars for the Army and Navy."

America was out of the Depression, and into World War II when the WPA ended in 1943.

Another Depression Era song looked forward to better days: "We're in the Money," from the film *Gold Diggers* of 1933. "Let's go we're in the money, Look up the skies are sunny / Old Man Depression you are through, you done us wrong."

These better days were brought about in part by programs like the WPA.

The permanent construction project at Fort Monmouth helped to employ New Jersey residents, as well as improve living and working conditions at the fort.