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W.P.A. Projects Left Their Stamp on the Region

By [TERRY GOLWAY](#)

WHEN the world's finest male golfers find themselves struggling to break par at this year's United States Open at [Bethpage State Park](#) in June, chances are they won't blame their plight on stimulus spending. But perhaps they should. After all, the rolling hills of the Bethpage Black golf course in Nassau County are a legacy of government efforts to create jobs and public works projects during [the Great Depression](#).

And when young professionals in search of housing tour a lovely Art Deco apartment complex in Jersey City with a magnificent view of lower Manhattan, they probably won't reflect on the vision of the city's fabled mayor, [Frank Hague](#). But they ought to, because Hague put up the buildings in the 1930s, albeit for use as a medical center, not as a condominium project.

Bethpage State Park and the old Jersey City Medical Center were expanded with labor provided by the [Works Progress Administration](#), one of the vaunted New Deal programs that put millions of people to work around the country during the Great Depression. They make up what the historian Nick Taylor called the "invisible legacy" of Depression-era public works projects in the New York region. "That legacy is all around us," said Mr. Taylor, author of "[American-Made: The Enduring History of the W.P.A.](#)" "We just don't see it because we take it for granted."

Suddenly, however, the work of the W.P.A. and other New Deal agencies has re-emerged as a model for the Obama administration's massive economic stimulus program, with its hundreds of billions devoted to rebuilding and modernizing the nation's infrastructure. Efforts like the W.P.A.'s flood-relief work in Hartford and the agency's expansion of [Bear Mountain State Park](#) in Orange County were typical labor-intensive jobs programs that left a physical stamp of Depression-era federal intervention.

But the W.P.A. did more than build or improve highways, parks, schools and hospitals. Artists executed murals still on display in government buildings on Long Island and throughout Connecticut. Writers compiled archives in New Jersey towns that had limited or no organized records. Actors and other performers entertained audiences through the [Federal Theater Project](#), a vibrant part of the W.P.A.

"There's this stereotype that people who worked for the W.P.A. were all raking leaves," said [Natalie A. Naylor](#), emeritus professor of history at [Hofstra University](#) and former director of the university's [Long Island Studies Institute](#). "That's not really accurate at all. You had music programs and art programs in addition to construction projects."

The city of Norwalk, Conn., has one of the nation's largest surviving collections of W.P.A. murals, thanks to a restoration effort in the 1980s that preserved nearly two dozen in the old Norwalk High School, now City Hall. The rescued artwork is on display there, while other murals decorate Norwalk Community

College, the city's public library and maritime aquarium, and other public places.

Though many of the murals depict scenes from local history, several are more exotic: Five murals by an artist named Arthur G. Hull illustrate imagined scenes from the travels of [Marco Polo](#). The Hull murals are on permanent display in the Norwalk Transit District's headquarters. A spokesman for the Transit District, Louis Schulman, said the agency "persuaded the city to twist our arm to use some federal money to document the city's mural collection." The agency photographed each mural and published a book about the collection several years ago.

The scenes that decorate the headquarters of South Side Hose Company 2 on Long Beach Road in Hempstead, Long Island, are closer to home. There, on the walls of a second-floor conference room, are six W.P.A. murals showing the history of firefighting from colonial times to the early 20th century.

In New Jersey, the W.P.A. commissioned an outdoor sculpture titled "Light Dispelling Darkness" by the artist Waylande Gregory. The sculpture, an optimistic piece depicting the victory of education and science over the forces of war, greed and materialism, has been restored and remains on public view in Middlesex County's Roosevelt Park in Edison, itself a W.P.A. project named in honor of the agency's patron.

The jobless, whether they raked leaves or designed works of art, were not the only people who received help from the W.P.A. Local officials like [Robert Moses](#) and Hague gained extraordinary power and access to federal dollars, albeit for different reasons. Moses, a Republican who ran for governor of New York in 1934 against Herbert H. Lehman — the candidate [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) had handpicked to succeed him — benefited from W.P.A. spending because of the vast array of shovel-ready projects he had lined up on Long Island and elsewhere. Hague, who served as Jersey City's mayor from 1917 to 1947, developed a mutually beneficial political alliance with Roosevelt during the 1932 presidential campaign, when he turned out an enormous crowd for a Roosevelt rally on the Jersey Shore in Sea Girt. "Roosevelt noticed that," said Thomas F. Banit, a history professor at Kean University in Union. "He would have been satisfied with 5,000 people. Instead, Hague turned out over a hundred thousand."

One out of every seven W.P.A. dollars was spent in New York City in the mid-1930s, according to Mr. Taylor. Beyond the five boroughs, however, Jersey City became the epicenter of W.P.A. activity in the region. About \$50 million in federal dollars flowed into Jersey City during President Roosevelt's first two terms, allowing Mayor Hague to build, among other things, the huge medical center that became his pride and joy. He named the center's maternity hospital for his mother, Margaret, and he kept a secret, paneled office of his own in the complex.

"It was three times bigger than the city needed, but Hague was thinking of trying to create a greater Jersey City out of Hudson County's smaller cities," said the historian [Thomas Fleming](#), whose father, Thomas J. Fleming Sr., was a Democratic leader in the city's old Sixth Ward during Hague's era. The medical center moved out of the giant complex several years ago, and a number of the buildings have been converted to residential units.

Jersey City may offer a cautionary tale about the ways in which extraordinary federal spending can become entangled with the ambitions and political machinations of local politicians. By the late 1920s,

Hague seemed to be a spent force in Jersey City. He barely won re-election in 1929, and as the presidential election of 1932 approached, Hague threw his support behind New York's former governor, [Alfred E. Smith](#), a Democrat who had lost the 1928 presidential election to [Herbert Hoover](#). Smith, however, lost the nomination to his successor in Albany, Roosevelt. Hague found himself aboard the wrong horse, but he shrewdly made amends by orchestrating the Sea Girt rally for Roosevelt. That November, Hague's machine and influence turned out a huge vote for Roosevelt. The president remembered Hague when the time came to dole out the Depression-era's stimulus dollars.

"The W.P.A. was a godsend to Hague," said Mr. Fleming. "Virtually every person who got a W.P.A. job in New Jersey was told he got it thanks to Frank Hague." The mayor was careful to make sure his patron received all due recognition. When the W.P.A. finished construction of a new sports complex in Jersey City, Hague named it [Roosevelt Stadium](#). The ballpark, which served as home of baseball's [Jersey City Giants](#), was torn down in 1985.

According to Mr. Fleming's 2005 memoir, "Mysteries of My Father," the elder Mr. Fleming regularly sent unemployed Jersey City residents to see the local W.P.A. administrator in the city, who found jobs thanks to his political contacts. But one supplicant was beyond such help. "He was the son of one of Hague's enemies," Mr. Fleming recalled. His father used his political contacts to find the man a job in Newark, out of Hague's reach.

Jersey City was hardly the only place where W.P.A. spending and politics became intertwined. The longtime mayor of Boston, [James Michael Curley](#), was denied control over federal spending because, several historians have written, he did not turn out numbers for Roosevelt as Hague and other allies did. In New York City, Roosevelt and the head of the W.P.A., [Harry L. Hopkins](#), kept W.P.A. spending and other federal money out of the hands of the [Tammany Hall](#) political machine, in part because it was the avowed enemy of one of Roosevelt's favorite Republicans, Mayor [Fiorello H. La Guardia](#). A Roosevelt confidante, Edward J. Flynn, who controlled the Bronx [Democratic Party](#), also had a hand in distributing W.P.A. money in his borough and elsewhere.

Roosevelt's critics inevitably charged that the White House treated the W.P.A. as an arm of its political operation. Representative John J. O'Connor of Manhattan, a Democratic critic of the New Deal, charged in 1938 that the White House was using W.P.A. labor and money to support a primary challenge against him. O'Connor was one of several Democrats whom Roosevelt sought to defeat in the 1938 primaries because of their opposition to the New Deal, but only O'Connor lost. Flynn managed the campaign of O'Connor's opponent, James H. Fay.

"Politics played a role in the W.P.A., but Roosevelt told the nation in a fireside chat that he wanted to hear from citizens about ways to improve federal spending," Mr. Taylor said. "He wanted to make sure taxpayers were getting their money's worth at the local level. Local politicians who had the ability to produce plans for projects were funded. Those who didn't, weren't."

Officials in the New York region were quick to take advantage of Washington's wish to spend as much money as quickly as possible. Hague, for example, had already begun work on the [Jersey City Medical Center](#) before Roosevelt's election. The W.P.A. money allowed him to expand the complex into the

nation's third-largest medical facility. At Hague's insistence, the center offered medical care to all Jersey City residents regardless of their ability to pay.

W.P.A. money and labor played a critical role in Connecticut in the aftermath of a [huge hurricane in 1938](#) which killed more than 90 state residents. Hundreds of W.P.A. workers were dispatched to Hartford to build sandbag walls along the Connecticut River in the city's South End, enabling the city to avoid blowing up a dike elsewhere to help divert the river.

On Long Island, Robert Moses began building his network of parkways and parks before the W.P.A. was created, but the new federal spending allowed him to expand his ambitions. W.P.A. money also filtered down into the Island's towns and villages. Schools, courthouses, firehouses and other government buildings were decorated with murals, many of them depicting scenes from Long Island history.

"The artists researched local history and then depicted it in their artwork," Professor Naylor said. "The idea was to record the memory of certain periods of history."

Oyster Bay was the center of Long Island's W.P.A. arts projects, perhaps because it was the home of Roosevelt's distant relation — the other President Roosevelt, Theodore. The Oyster Bay post office was decorated with four sculptures by the Italian-born sculptor Leo Lentelli, while the town's post office featured six fresco murals, including one depicting [Theodore Roosevelt](#) and his children.

For golfers, a visit to Bethpage offers an opportunity to play like the pros — or not — and a chance to reflect on the W.P.A.'s legacy to the world of missed fairways and unplayable lies. The park, like Hague's medical center, was begun before the W.P.A. was founded. But with the assistance of W.P.A. workers, the scope of the project expanded. The park's clubhouse and four of its five courses, including the legendary Black course, were either built or improved with federal relief funds and labor.

"We have some original stuff left in the clubhouse," said Dave Cataldo, park superintendent at Bethpage. One of the clubhouse's signature rooms, the Lenox Room, "is just about intact," he said. Golf's greatest names will use the clubhouse when [Bethpage Black](#) plays host to the United States Open from June 18 to 21. [Tiger Woods](#) will be looking to defend his title, and to recreate his winning performance from 2002, when the Open was last played at Bethpage.

The diversity of projects developed by the W.P.A. during the 1930s is astonishing, Mr. Taylor said. In New Jersey, unemployed white-collar workers were assigned the task of creating archival records and surveys in towns like Garfield, North Arlington and Rutherford, among others. "So many things might not exist if the W.P.A. hadn't been able to match the talents of workers with specific assignments," Mr. Taylor said.

That creativity certainly provides an object lesson for today's stimulus spending, which thus far has emphasized big public works projects, not arts and culture. Today's work force has changed dramatically since the 1930s, said Mark Wasserman, a history professor at [Rutgers University](#) in New Brunswick.

"The work force is more white collar now, and white-collar workers don't have the skills to build bridges," Professor Wasserman said. "It's a different world now."

Perhaps, but renewed interest in the work of the W.P.A. suggests that in some ways, things may not have changed much at all.

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