

From Print to Electronic: Digitization of Northwestern University Libraries' WPA Documents Collection

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The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established as an independent agency by Executive Order 7034 on May 6, 1935 as a work relief program under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide work for millions of people during the Great Depression. The Administration was transferred to the Federal Works Agency and its name changed to the Work Projects Administration effective July 1, 1939. Many of the WPA documents held by Northwestern University Libraries (NUL) were obtained via the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) but there are also many items from local WPA offices from around the country.

There were access, scope and collection care issues associated with the WPA documents which lead to the questioning of whether the materials should remain a part of the broader U.S. Federal Documents Collection (that was administrated by the then Government and Geographic Information and Data Services Department). Through a series of events, it was determined that the WPA documents would be digitized and retained.

A digitization proposal for the WPA documents was submitted to the then University Libraries' Digital Projects Subcommittee (DPSC), where it was realized that since the documents were primary text they would be an excellent candidate for digitization by utilizing the Kirtas APT Bookscan 1200 machine. Purchased in 2005 and primarily being used for preservation reformatting, the Kirtas APT Bookscan 1200 was one of the first book scanning machines available with page turning abilities, in addition to the capability of scanning 1,200 pages in an hour.

Staff from the then Digital Media Services Department (DMS) reviewed the materials for digitization and even though some pieces were fragile the project was deemed feasible. The documents came in a variety of sizes and binding, were held in closed stacks with serials being separated from the monographs and were searched against the Hathi Trust Digital Library. It was discovered that about 100 titles were already digitized, leaving over 400 more to scan. SuDoc numbers were located or created for the materials and bibliographic records were found for most of the documents via OCLC. When records could not be obtained brief ones were created (this was very important due to the fact that the print records were cloned to form the basis for the electronic records for the scanned materials).

The binding of the materials made the digitization process easy but there were initial concerns about documents size since the Kirtas machine could not turn the pages of oversize materials or those with smaller dimensions. In the end all the monographic documents were scanned on the Kirtas machine, however the machine used the Libraries' Books Workflow Interface (BWI), an application developed in-house and funded by the Mellon Foundation. Since, the application (which in its public view was named NU Books-books.northwestern.edu) was in continuous development there were limitations to its capabilities; most notably, it could not handle large serial runs or books with over approximately 2,000 pages, therefore none of the WPA serials were digitized. However, all WPA documents received cataloguing, collection care where needed and were integrated into the rest of the U.S. Federal Documents Collection.

In 2012 scanning of the WPA documents began and the project was completed in 2013. Four hundred and twenty-two monographic titles were scanned and are accessible via NUL's discovery tool NU Search. However, in 2015 it was announced that Northwestern University Libraries would discontinue NU Books and its content would be placed into the Hathi Trust. With this information, the fifty-one WPA serials titles that were held and not digitized were searched via the Hathi Trust, Google Books and Internet Archive. Those not found, were added to the previous digitized monographs; totaling 526 digitized items. In 2016, the WPA documents were deposited as a collection within the Hathi Trust, making these historic documents viewable, searchable and available at no charge to the general public.



Citations (Left to Right)

A Photographic History of the hurricane and flood that devastated Connecticut on September 21, 1938. (back cover)

W.P.A. Lends a Helping Hand, 1936 (cover).

WPA and the Negro, [1936] pg.5.

Young and Old Look for Work, [1941?] pg.588.