Depression and the New Deal in South Carolina

South Carolinians gathered in Columbia on the afternoon of October 24, 1929, to watch the biggest football game in the state. The Tigers of Clemson College, undefeated that year, came to town to play the Fighting Gamecocks of the University of South Carolina in a game that would all but decide the Southern Conference championship. The Clemson–South Carolina match was (and is) the state’s biggest intrastate football rivalry, and Big Thursday, as the annual event was known, regularly drew several thousand fans. The year 1929 was no different, as 14,000 fans jammed the stadium at the State Fairgrounds for the contest. Clemson won, 21–14, handing the Gamecocks only their second loss of the season, and fans went home, all satisfied with a well-fought game even if not all of them were happy with the outcome.¹

Big Thursday 1929 happened to be Black Thursday, the day the stock market took its fatal plunge and ushered in the era known as the Great Depression. The news from New York City traveled slowly to South Carolina, and when the initial shock wore off, most South Carolinians wondered what it all meant, and what it would mean to them personally. The state’s economy was depressed before the crash, and few South Carolinians were investors in the stock market. But the economy quickly worsened throughout the state, as banks closed, cotton prices dropped, and mills laid off workers.

South Carolina’s dependence upon cotton had pushed the state’s economy into an economic downturn as early as the end of World War I, when overproduction of cotton and overextension of credit caused a sizable decline in the price of cotton. In addition, the boll weevil wreaked havoc on the cotton crop in the early 1920s, nearly devastating the crop in the state. Cotton farmers then had less cotton to sell, and what they did have sold at lower prices. Since over half of the state’s workers worked in agriculture, almost exclusively in cotton, the downturn in prices and the devastation of the crop directly affected half the state’s workforce. Of the other half of the workers, approximately 25 percent worked in manufacturing, primarily in the cotton mills, which also felt the
brunt of the failure of the cotton crops. Workers both in the fields and in the factories had less work to do, and received less money for it.  

South Carolina's industrial economy consisted primarily of cotton textiles; according to historian Jack Hayes, the state's manufactured products were dominated by cotton production, with approximately 70 percent of the value of the state's manufactured products being cotton textiles. This single-industry dominance was unique to South Carolina. Competition from other domestic textile producers and the emergence of synthetic fibers in the mid-1920s, combined with the failure of the crop in South Carolina, caused a depressed textile market in the state. Textile securities dropped by half in the years between 1923 and 1929. Mill owners responded by cutting the workforce and increasing the workload or by hiring part-time workers instead of full-time workers, keeping production quotas at an unrealistic level for part-time employees. In doing so some saved their mills but created a workforce of overworked, underpaid employees who could not afford to keep their families fed and their children in school.

Although the South Carolina economy was already depressed, the stock market crash plunged the state into further economic havoc. Cotton prices continued to fall and then bottomed out, dropping from a high of 38 cents a pound in 1919 to 17 cents a pound in 1920 and to less than 5 cents per pound in 1932. Land values plummeted accordingly, as did per capita income in the state, which fell from $261 in 1929 to $151 by 1933. The textile industry followed, with the average annual wage of the mill worker dropping 31 percent. The banking industry, which had suffered during the agricultural depression of the 1920s (when almost half of the state's banks closed), only worsened during the early 1930s, when even major financial institutions closed. Panic spread among depositors, who rushed the banks to withdraw savings, endangering banks that were otherwise sound.

Governor Ibra Blackwood offered hollow assurances regarding the resilience of the economy and appealed to "patriotic" South Carolinians to leave their money in the state's banks. Blackwood's 1933 State of the State Address, according to historian Walter Edgar, "could have been ghost-written by Herbert Hoover," so unrealistic were its goals and expectations. State government seemed unwilling or unable to do anything: the Board of Public Welfare had ceased to exist in 1926 when then governor J. G. Richards vetoed its appropriations, and the state constitution permitted public assistance only to Confederate veterans, their widows, and faithful former slaves. The state provided no assistance to people who were blind, the aged, or dependent children until the state constitution was amended in 1937. In meeting the needs of the unemployed and the destitute, local governments were as ineffectual as the state
government. In August 1930 Columbia’s mayor, Lawrence B. Owens, declared that although unemployment had risen slightly, there was no crisis, and the city council refused to set up a municipal unemployment agency. In Charleston, when the People’s Bank closed, the deposits for the city payroll were lost. Other cities such as Greenville, Columbia, and Florence tried to trim their budgets by cutting jobs, a technique also tried at the state level, but those local governments failed to provide assistance to the newly unemployed. The city governments of Columbia and Charleston, the University of South Carolina, and the state government resorted to paying their remaining employees in scrip. Unemployment rates climbed as textile mills and local governments laid off workers throughout the state.5

The urban unemployed of South Carolina found small solace in the overtures of their city governments and civic organizations. In Charleston, city trucks transported the unemployed to local farms on the outskirts of the city, where they might pick vegetables that farmers were willing to donate. A similar project in Columbia created a municipal woodyard where needy families could obtain fuel; the Woodyard Fund also provided a room and a meal for transients willing to work in the woodyard. During the Christmas season of 1930, Columbia civic groups (including the Rotarians, Lions, Kiwanis, and Knights of Columbus) collected food, toys, and clothing, and even the Ku Klux Klan (in full Klan regalia) passed out fifty baskets of food on Christmas Eve. Private charities in Columbia served more than 700,000 free meals in 1931.6 Without garden plots or farm animals to rely upon, the urban poor were forced to rely on whatever charity was extended.

Farm families in some ways were luckier than the “city folk” in that they were more self-sufficient, at least when it came to food. Those families who owned their own farms often grew much of what they ate, owned a milk cow, and raised a few chickens to provide eggs and meat. A few pigs meant that seasoning meat was available; more pigs provided pork for meals and for bartering. But even in fairly prosperous farm families, the Depression “taught you not to wish for what you couldn’t have,” in the words of one South Carolinian.7 Less than 3 percent of rural South Carolina homes had electricity, which meant that hardly anyone owned luxury items such as electric ranges, washing machines, or refrigerators, and the Depression just prolonged the lack of these luxuries. The Depression also forced many farm families to try to enter the paying workforce, when they could find transportation and a job. Fathers and older sons tried to find work in the textile mills, often with white men displacing women or African American workers, at the rate of 10 cents an hour, while older daughters or unmarried sisters looked for jobs in department stores. Younger children hired out to pick cotton in neighbors’ fields.8
The rural poor, both black and white, were less fortunate. Sharecroppers often had no choice but to concentrate on the cash crop. If they grew gardens, the plots were small. Cows, hogs, and chickens required time and money that sharecroppers did not have. With such a meager diet, poor in nutrients and vitamins, malnutrition and disease ran rampant among the rural poor. David Kennedy, writing about the Depression era, calls southern sharecroppers “probably the poorest Americans.”9 Lorena Hickok, a journalist assigned to reporting conditions to the Roosevelt administration, described the plight of southern sharecroppers in January 1934 as “half-starved Whites and Blacks, struggling in competition for less to eat than my dog gets at home, for the privilege of living in huts that are infinitely less comfortable than his kennel.” The living conditions of southern sharecroppers were so bleak that Hickok was shocked: “I just can’t describe to you some of the things I’ve seen and heard down here these last few days. I shall never forget them—never as long as I live.”10

While the Depression affected all South Carolinians in some way, African Americans were particularly hard hit, in both the rural and urban areas of the state. Rural blacks, like most of their white counterparts, worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, except there were more of them. Urban blacks usually worked in service industries as maids, porters, janitors, dishwashers, laundresses, or cooks. In the early 1930s many urban black women working as maids, laundresses, or cooks lost their jobs, as their white employers could no longer afford to employ them. Businesses in the cities felt pressure to lay off black men working as porters, waiters, dishwashers, or janitors in order to hire unemployed whites. Black-owned businesses in the cities almost disappeared during the Depression because their patrons could not afford to pay for their services.11

At the time of the presidential election of 1932, South Carolinians of all income levels, urban and rural, black and white, felt the ravages of the Depression. By 1932, 45 percent of South Carolina farmers were delinquent in paying taxes on their farms. That same year the Charleston News and Courier reported 1,400 Sumter County families were “unemployed, hungry, and practically naked,” and at least two residents of Pineville and two in Beaufort died of starvation.12 Meals, when available, became more and more monotonous, as fewer and fewer families could afford delicacies such as seasoning meats, ice, or sugar. Mothers and wives mended clothing and shoes, and then mended them again. “New” clothes were most often fashioned out of old clothes or flour or feed sacks. “Visiting” and going to church became the most popular spare-time activities, replacing going to the movies. Children dropped out of school to look for work, because they did not have clothes to wear or were so malnourished or sick they were unable to attend. Families who had once felt financially secure
found themselves forced to cash in life insurance policies, to bring older children home from college, or to move in with relatives.  

Columbia's central location in the state and its role as a transportation hub made it a stopping point for hundreds of transients looking for any type of work, including sharecroppers, unemployed transients, and some unemployed professionals. Temporary quarters were found for some of these transients at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Camp Jackson, or the county jail, but the city could not, or would not, provide for them all. At least 100 people lived in boxes and abandoned cars at the Columbia city dump in 1932. In 1935 Columbia mayor Lawrence B. Owens was quoted as saying: “They don’t worry about themselves, so I stopped worrying about them.”

South Carolina voted overwhelmingly Democratic in the 1920s and 1930s, and the state's senators, representatives, and Governor Blackwood provided a strong base of support for Franklin Roosevelt in 1931 and 1932. South Carolina refused to listen to Herbert Hoover's hollow promises of “prosperity just around the corner,” and the state gave Roosevelt his widest margin of victory in any state, with 98 percent of the vote. South Carolina's junior senator, James F. Byrnes, emerged as a close confidant of the new president, a leader of the New Deal, and South Carolina's most influential senator on the national stage since John C. Calhoun.

The state's support for Roosevelt paid off immediately during the president's first hundred days. According Walter Edgar, “Given the scope of economic distress in South Carolina, almost all New Deal legislation had an impact on the lives of its citizens.” The Emergency Relief Act provided the states with grants to assist their needy citizens, administered under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). The South Carolina Emergency Relief Administration (SCERA) began operation in June 1933 under the directorship of Malcolm Miller. The grant money, administered at the county level, was used to provide jobs, food, clothing, and direct money for the needy, and it provided thousands of South Carolinians with subsistence, if not comfort. However, the administration of SCERA was a “nightmare,” due primarily to the absence of a state welfare agency before the creation of SCERA. FERA director Harry Hopkins and the federal government expected the states to match the federal money in most cases, often at a ratio of three dollars for every federal dollar; the fact that Hopkins required South Carolina to match only 2 percent of the total FERA funds spent within the state is partially indicative of the desperate situation in which South Carolina found itself. With no state welfare program to serve as an institutional foundation, South Carolina's state and local governments were required to create a large, complex administrative agency from scratch, resulting in untrained personnel working for little pay, described in one account as
“conscientious, hardworking, sincere, and incompetent.” 17 Whatever the difficulties, SCERA provided some sort of relief to approximately 25 percent of the state’s population, and South Carolina was the only state in which African Americans received more FERA aid than whites. 18

SCERA money provided jobs in farming, construction, and public works for men but also provided opportunities for women in the forms of sewing rooms, day nurseries, and public libraries, as well as working with a school lunch program that provided hot meals for over 100,000 South Carolina children in 1934. Women also assisted county home demonstration agents in training rural families in canning and preserving fruits and vegetables and in making clothes. As important as the work program was to the relief of South Carolinians, SCERA’s direct relief, in the form of food and clothing, was even more important. SCERA workers planted vegetable gardens in each county to provide food, while over 100,000 head of cattle came to state slaughterhouses from the drought-stricken Midwest, alleviating the plight of midwestern farmers while at the same time providing beef for malnourished Carolinians. With the assistance of FERA, SCERA distributed more than 14 million pounds of meat (in addition to the beef), 3.5 million pounds of flour, and 2.7 million pounds of potatoes, as well as butter, lard, rice, cheese, milk, sugar, and fruits between 1933 and 1935. 19

Roosevelt never intended FERA and SCERA to be permanent relief measures, only immediate, stopgap attempts to alleviate some of the devastation wrought on South Carolinians. More lasting relief came through other New Deal agencies, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Social Security Administration, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the Public Works Administration (PWA). These New Deal agencies generally were more successful than others in providing long-term relief. Other agencies, most notably the National Recovery Administration (NRA), also attempted to provide long-term relief, and while not usually judged as a success, the NRA did provide limited relief to South Carolina’s mill workers. Together, these programs provided economic relief to a variety of South Carolinians, reaching whites and blacks, young and old, men and women, urban and rural residents, professionals and laborers, and the educated and the uneducated alike.

Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA)

South Carolina’s farmers may have been some of the last to hear the news of the Great Depression; according to them, the economy had been depressed for a long time prior to 1929. In 1933 both cotton and tobacco were selling for less than the cost of production, prompting South Carolina congressmen, as well as those from North Carolina and Georgia, to approach Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace for assistance. Wallace responded with a plan setting guaranteed
minimum prices for both cotton and tobacco, the foundation of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). Passage of this plan led to increased support of Roosevelt and the New Deal among the farming population. During Roosevelt’s first hundred days, March to June 1933, Congress passed the AAA, creating the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (also known as the AAA), which asked farmers producing seven basic commodities (including cotton and tobacco) to take land out of cultivation in exchange for payment from the secretary of agriculture. South Carolina farm owners almost unanimously voiced approval of the plan and began signing contracts to plow under parts of their existing crops and to leave segments of land fallow in future years.  

Although the AAA provided a great deal of assistance to the struggling farmers of the state by the end of the 1930s, it did not end the economic struggle of many farming families; the war years of the early 1940s later brought the desired economic boon to South Carolina farmers, not the New Deal. In addition, the AAA did little to relieve the drastic situation of South Carolina sharecroppers and tenant farmers, who rarely saw the benefits the AAA provided to farm owners. Their only protection under the AAA was a clause that provided that they would be allowed to continue to live in their homes and work the land, even if the landowner cut his or her overall production as required.

Tenant farmers were to receive parity payments through the AAA, a system that worked marginally well. Very few complaints about the system were reported, likely owing more to the tenuous relationship tenant farmers had with the landowners than to the success of parity payments. Although originally designed to provide direct payment to tenants, South Carolina senator Ellison “Cotton Ed” Smith prevented this type of direct relief: “You can’t do this to my niggers, paying checks to them. They don’t know what to do with the money. The money should come to me. I’ll take care of them. They’re mine.” This was just one instance when the issue of race prevented economic relief from reaching the population in which it had the potential to do the most good. It was up to other New Deal programs to provide relief to the rural South Carolina population. The federal administration had to find more creative ways to provide relief for the poorest of the South Carolina population, especially the large African American population. Programs like the Rural Electrification Administration, the Soil Conservation Service, the Farm Credit Administration, and the Resettlement Administration provided additional assistance to South Carolina’s farmers.

*Rural Electrification Administration (REA)*

Although the public had been advocating the extension of electricity to rural areas since about 1920, the public utilities in the state had deemed it too
expensive to run lines to outlying areas (in reality, most of the state), and the state government simply could not afford to conduct the needed studies or run the lines by itself. But extending electricity to rural areas was a priority throughout mostly rural South Carolina, and in 1932 the legislature created a new division of the Railroad Commission to investigate the state's electrical industry. The Utilities Division of the Railroad Commission worked with the University of South Carolina's Department of Electrical Engineering to produce a statewide survey of potential electricity customers along state highways. The resulting study led to the passage of a bill designed to extend electrical services to farms situated on state highways, providing electricity to 11,000 homes. The South Carolina Rural Electrification Act of 1933 had one main catch: the money had to come from the federal government.23

While South Carolina pursued providing farmers with electricity, at least on paper, the federal government, building on lessons learned through the experience of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in providing electricity to rural southerners, assisted in this effort. Beginning in 1935 the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) provided the federal financing required to extend electrical power to those in rural areas, who received electricity with great enthusiasm. South Carolina's rural landowners were quick to install electric lights and buy radios and electric irons when electricity became available. By 1940 almost 15 percent of South Carolina farmers had electricity, up from less than 3 percent in 1934. As the quality of life improved as a result of electricity, so did farm production: for example, egg production increased by 30 percent through keeping poultry buildings lit at night (perhaps keeping the chickens awake to continue to lay), and milk production increased by 5 to 15 percent at some farms.24 Aside from the small gains in egg and milk production, the REA did not directly affect most South Carolinians' pocketbooks, but it did improve the quality of life for many rural residents, enabling them to enjoy evening hours together while listening to news and radio programs.

Soil Conservation Service (SCS)

The Soil Conservation Service (SCS) began as the Soil Erosion Service in the Department of the Interior, but in 1935 Roosevelt transferred it to the Department of Agriculture. The SCS worked to educate farmers about methods of soil conservation. South Carolina's farmland was badly eroded; in fourteen counties at least half of the farmland was so eroded it was classified as useless. With labor provided by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the SCS taught farmers the benefits of terracing, cover cropping, and reforestation. By 1936 five demonstration projects were under way in South Carolina, with 95 percent of farmers in the project area following prescribed SCS practices, and over 90
percent of farmers living in a twenty-five-mile radius received instruction through SCS projects. Farmers and CCC young men planted over 700,000 acres of South Carolina land with soil-conserving crops and grasses and implemented soil conservation measures on more than 75 percent of the state’s total cropland.²⁵

Farm Credit Administration (FCA)
The Farm Credit Administration (FCA) lent money to farm owners to refinance farm mortgages and to assist in buying seed, livestock, and equipment. The FCA provided over $61 million in assistance to South Carolina farm owners but did not give direct assistance to sharecroppers or tenant farmers. SCERA’s Rural Rehabilitation Division, however, did provide sharecroppers and tenants with similar loans for farm equipment, livestock, seed, and fertilizer. The Rural Rehabilitation Division, and later the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA), worked to relocate farmers living and working on submarginal land to more productive land, while teaching the relocated families additional skills to increase their self-sufficiency. These programs eventually established six resettlement projects in South Carolina, providing some 460 families with new farmland. Resettlement provided a new start for black as well as white tenant farming families, although in segregated projects. Although ambitious, the resettlement program was plagued by mismanagement from the start. In addition, most resettlement farms in the state were designed to provide only a semblance of self-reliance; in actuality, the farms were too small to successfully raise cash crops such as cotton and tobacco. However, resettlement provided some individual families with a higher standard of living, better land for farming, and greater education and opportunity for increased self-sufficiency.²⁶

National Recovery Administration (NRA)
Federal relief programs also impacted industrial and commercial activities in South Carolina. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and its National Recovery Administration (NRA) brought federal assistance to mill workers, although not without some backlash from the mill owners. Federal programs guaranteed a minimum wage, established a forty-hour workweek, and abolished child labor. These initiatives raised the standard of living for mill workers and their families and significantly improved their quality of life. South Carolina textile workers wholeheartedly endorsed the NRA. One such worker, Henry Coyle, of Gaffney, wrote the president: “I want you to know that I am for you in this most wonderful undertaking. . . . My faith is in you my heart with you and I am for you sink or swim.”²⁷
Despite the positive impact the NRA had on many South Carolina mill hands, the federal requirement of a minimum wage for textile workers negatively impacted the state’s black mill workers. Instead of paying black operatives the same minimum wage prescribed for whites, mill owners simply laid off their black employees, choosing to cut costs or employ more whites in those positions. Historian Paul Lofton calls the NRA “the one New Deal program that had a basically negative effect on South Carolina blacks.”

Federal collective bargaining provisions rang hollow in South Carolina. Textile unions found it difficult to unionize in South Carolina, and striking workers faced state governmental opposition in meeting their demands. The failure of the 1934 general textile strike left many mill workers in South Carolina, as elsewhere, frustrated with the unionizing experience. Mill owners and management felt threatened by the new federal regulations as well as foreign competition, until Congress, pressured by Senator Byrnes in 1936, increased the tariffs on imported textiles. Textile orders then increased to the point that South Carolina mills had to refuse incoming orders, until demand fell off with the 1937 recession. After the recession, the cotton and textile market in the state did not recover fully until the 1940s, during World War II.

Social Security

The minimum wage for workers was just one part of the federal strategy to increase consumer spending. Just as important was Social Security, which increased the buying power of the elderly. Social Security changed the expectations of aging South Carolinians. South Carolina was one of only six states that did not have a pension plan for seniors by the mid-1930s and one of fourteen lacking aid for people who were blind, and only South Carolina and Georgia had failed to provide assistance to dependent children. With the advent of Social Security at the national level, the state government had to act to amend the state constitution to provide assistance for these groups. The requisite 1937 amendments provided aid for the aged, those who were blind, and dependent children. That same year the legislature passed the Public Welfare Act, which created a permanent department to administer Social Security programs as well as other welfare, insurance, health, and unemployment compensation programs. However beneficial the early Social Security program in the state, a large number of the population was overlooked. Farm and domestic workers were not eligible for the program, leaving out most African Americans and women, and the state’s poorest citizens.

FERA and SCERA had provided some initial direct relief to the most needy of South Carolinians in the early 1930s, and Social Security generally provided
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for children and the aged. But a large segment of South Carolina’s population—the middle class—needed some sort of assistance as well. FERA and SCERA met immediate needs such as food and clothing, but at the same time demonstrated the need to provide work relief for the middle class, and the New Deal institutionalized these programs through the WPA and PWA, which found jobs for skilled and unskilled manual workers as well as white collar employees. Both programs had similar objectives, to provide work relief while making a lasting impact on public infrastructure. The WPA concentrated efforts on projects with a budget of less than $25,000, while the PWA primarily handled larger projects. Both agencies addressed a variety of needs in South Carolina and performed projects that left lasting benefits in the state.

Works Progress Administration (WPA)
The WPA assisted the state government with projects aimed at improving infrastructure, education, and the arts. The agency changed the landscape of the state through road projects, improving the highway system and the quality of farm-to-market roads. WPA projects increased the number of miles of the state highway system by over 50 percent, from 6,000 to over 9,600 between 1933 and 1941. WPA educational work “contributed to the development of the educational facilities of the state unparalleled in its history,” according to a 1938 state appraisal committee. The agency built or improved over 2,000 schools for white and black students, provided literacy training for children and adults, built facilities for state colleges, and provided training and counseling for teens and young adults through the National Youth Administration (NYA). The NYA was one of the most successful WPA programs nationally, and became its own agency in 1939.32

The WPA provided opportunities for South Carolina’s blacks as well as whites, probably more equally than most other New Deal programs. The WPA paid workers at the same rate regardless of race. This policy drew criticism from many whites desiring work on WPA projects, and from white employers who began losing workers to higher paid jobs with the agency. White contractors in Greenville and elsewhere required black laborers to provide a “kickback” of their WPA wages in return for hiring them for jobs. While the WPA paid the same rates for whites and blacks, for the most part the WPA, as with many other New Deal programs, limited work opportunities for blacks to manual labor positions. Professional blacks in Columbia, including Dr. Robert Mance and educator and activist Modjeska Monteith Simkins, protested the limited possibilities for South Carolina’s African Americans. WPA officials responded by creating professional positions in Columbia. Professional blacks worked for
the WPA as teachers in adult and nursery schools and in health projects. While the WPA provided for black professionals in the state capitol, it is likely that this project was the only one of its kind in the state.\textsuperscript{33}

The WPA’s Women’s and Professional Division provided work for women, especially those who were single heads-of-households or who had spouses who were unable to work. Many of these projects were derivatives of projects initially begun under FERA and included sewing rooms, libraries, housekeeping or medical programs, and land beautification projects. Women also found work through other WPA divisions, especially working with the educational programs in classrooms, lunchrooms, or children’s health programs. These programs were more than “make-work”; they provided women with much-needed employment as well as assisted children, who were direct beneficiaries of some of the programs. The School Lunch Program in South Carolina operated through the assistance of local advisory councils, who assisted the federal government’s work by obtaining additional food. South Carolina had the second-largest WPA school lunch program in the country, feeding over 77,000 school-children daily and recording an average weight gain of three to eight pounds per child over the first five weeks of the program.\textsuperscript{34}

Professional women as well as men found work through the programs of the WPA’s Professional Division, such as the Federal Writers’ Project and the Federal Artists’ Project. Writers, historians, journalists, musicians, and artists found the Depression particularly hostile to their professions; they welcomed the opportunity to use their specialized training and talents.\textsuperscript{35} The South Carolina Writers’ Project, under the direction of Mabel Montgomery and Louise Jones DuBose, found work for writers, researchers, editors, and typists. While the Writers’ Project produced some twenty-three publications, including the massive \textit{South Carolina: A Guide to the Palmetto State}, \textit{Palmetto Pioneers: Six Stories of Early South Carolinians}, and \textit{South Carolina State Parks}, the Writers’ Project also employed historians, including Anne K. Gregorie, the first woman Ph.D. in history from the University of South Carolina. Under Gregorie’s leadership, historians began locating, transcribing, and preserving public records in all forty-six South Carolina counties, as well as some church records and private manuscript collections. The project, however, ignored records from black churches and manumission records. Although overall a successful project, in several counties local court clerks put the WPA workers in clerical positions, rather than allowing them to work on the records project. The state director closed the projects in at least two counties when the local clerks refused to cooperate. The Historic Records Survey, now a part of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, is still used daily by historians and genealogists alike. The Federal Writers’ Project in South Carolina also collected narratives of
African Americans who were former slaves, recognizing the historical value of their life stories.  

Other tangible benefits of the New Deal came through the Federal Artists Project (FAP). Musicians and artists in the employ of the WPA provided instruction to children and adults alike who were interested in music or art; South Carolina requested a massive teacher increase as a result of the popularity of the music classes throughout the state. The WPA also operated art galleries in Greenville, Columbia, Florence, Walterboro, and Beaufort.  

One early WPA project involved the reconstruction of a Charleston landmark, the Dock Street Theater. This building project delighted Charleston's historic preservation community, which previously had been ambivalent at best about New Deal projects. Artists employed by the FAP created scenery for the theater’s second grand opening gala, and WPA administrator Harry Hopkins presented the key to the theater to Charleston mayor Burnet Maybank. The Dock Street Theater was Charleston's first, but not the only, WPA historic preservation project; when the city sustained tornado damage in September 1938, Hopkins made $500,000 available for building repairs, including to the historic City Market and City Hall. Mayor Maybank's support of Roosevelt and friendship with Hopkins helped to ensure the infusion of WPA money into Charleston.  

Related to the arts projects conducted through the WPA, the Treasury Department contracted with artists across the country to provide murals and sculptures in courthouses and post offices throughout South Carolina. Vermont artist Stefan Hirsch's 1938 mural for the Federal Courthouse in Aiken caused a highly publicized controversy; when the mural was unveiled, the dark-skinned central figure, “Justice,” caused an uproar among local white residents and the judge in whose courtroom the painting was installed. The Treasury Department tried to broker a compromise in which Hirsch would lighten the skin tone of the female figure, but Hirsch refused. The federal judge, Frank Myers, covered the objectionable painting with a curtain while court was in session. This controversy serves as a reminder that although most New Deal projects were welcomed throughout South Carolina, there was some criticism and even hostility when projects did not go as initially planned. Often, if not always, race played a role in projects, in terms of pay scale, availability, and type of work, or even in the subject matter—or paint color—of a painting.  

The WPA provided work relief for a large number of skilled workers, including educators, medical personnel, artists, and writers, as well as assisting state government in projects that would have otherwise been unaffordable, such as infrastructure improvements in highways and schools. Another New Deal program, the PWA, concentrated on federal property within the state and also assisted in funding for other nonfederal projects.
Public Works Administration (PWA)

The PWA, established at the beginning of the New Deal, worked on repair and construction of federal property within the state and funded nonfederal projects through a grant-loan system. The government also funded slum clearance and housing projects through the PWA. In South Carolina, the PWA spent almost $36 million from 1933 to 1939, which resulted in several projects that, in the words of historian Jack Hayes, “literally changed the face of the Palmetto State” through the construction of highways, schools, courthouses, hospitals, post offices, a shipyard, and two massive hydroelectric projects as well as housing projects in Charleston and Columbia and, later, in Greenville and Spartanburg. The largest PWA projects in South Carolina were the federal Charleston Navy Yard and the two nonfederal hydroelectric projects, Buzzard Roost and Santee-Cooper. The Charleston Navy Yard dated to 1901 but had fallen into disrepair, and by the early 1930s it employed only 400 workers. In 1933 navy officials recommended closing the Navy Yard, to the dismay of Mayor Maybank and Senator James Byrnes. Byrnes’s influence helped save the Navy Yard, directing additional federal work to Charleston, and later that same year, the first PWA project began with the construction of the gunboat Charleston. Following the construction of the Charleston, the PWA constructed other boats and ships at the Charleston Navy Yard. The Navy Yard employed some 1,600 workers as shipbuilders, while other projects there provided an additional 1,700 workers on the repair and maintenance of the facilities and the construction of a new hospital and officers’ quarters.

The PWA also constructed hydroelectric projects throughout the state, which met with some controversy from the privately held power utilities. However, as the private companies proved unable or unwilling to extend electrical power to the most rural parts of the state, the federal projects received more acclaim than hostility. The Buzzard Roost project in the upstate and the much larger Santee-Cooper project in the midstate and low country provided much-needed electrical power to much of the state. Initially designed as a private enterprise, the federal government refused to grant PWA money to South Carolina for a private project, instead requiring the state to set up a state public service authority to oversee the project and thereby enabling it to qualify for PWA funds. The state legislation, modeled after the emerging federal TVA, provided for improved navigation, reclamation of swampland, reforestation, and hydroelectric power through the construction of dams, canals, and power plants. The Santee-Cooper project alone was the largest, most expensive PWA project on the East Coast. Besides providing hydroelectric power across South Carolina, Santee-Cooper employed over 16,000 workers, created two lakes, drained swamps, and
indirectly improved health through the eradication of malaria in a five-county area. In addition, the creation of impound lakes at both Buzzard Roost and Santee-Cooper expanded recreational opportunities in hunting, boating, and fishing, and further impacted the changing landscape in the state. The site for Greenwood State Park was selected in 1938 for its location in part because of the lakefront created by Buzzard Roost. The Santee-Cooper project also indirectly created an additional New Deal–related state park in the late 1940s, Santee State Park, in Orangeburg County, to take full advantage of the growing recreational opportunities provided on Lake Marion.

The legacy of the New Deal in South Carolina is mixed, as it is elsewhere. The previous narrative highlights both some of the failures and successes of a variety of New Deal programs in the state. Agencies such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration failed to provide adequately for the rural poor, while the NRA improved the lot of textile workers only marginally, at best. Many New Deal programs in South Carolina, as in other states, were fraught with racism, incompetence, or corruption. Other programs, such as the WPA, provided limited opportunities for previously marginalized sections of the population, including women and African Americans. However small the gains or few the opportunities, these opportunities were indeed improvements over the situations for many in South Carolina prior to the New Deal.

There is no question that the New Deal changed South Carolina’s landscape, from the rural landscape to the built environment of the cities. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the RA, and the SCS transformed the way South Carolinians farmed their land, introducing terracing, crop rotations, and other farming techniques that changed the farm landscape. The REA added electrical lines to the landscape. WPA projects improved roads and added everything from school buildings to art projects to many small-town environments, while also reconstructing historic buildings such as Charleston’s Dock Street Theater. The PWA did a great deal to change the state’s landscape through its public buildings, roads, housing projects, and, of course, the lakes, dams, power plants, and resulting recreational facilities of Santee-Cooper. These visual legacies should remind South Carolinians and visitors of the impact of the New Deal within the state.

Another New Deal program, the CCC, assisted in the creation of a new landscape for South Carolina through its work in forestry, fire prevention, soil conservation, and the construction of state parks. The CCC employed South Carolina’s young men, white and black, and provided them with jobs, education, and vocational training. The CCC’s work changed the state in many ways. The building of fire towers across the state and the implementation of soil conservation projects such as terracing and the planting of kudzu permanently
altered the countryside, while providing jobs and homes to thousands of young men. Most obviously, the CCC state parks dramatically altered the landscape, with the construction of buildings, lakes, roads, and smaller recreational facilities, and the planting of thousands of trees throughout the state. No CCC project has been more lasting than the seventeen state parks constructed with CCC labor, and, along with Santee-Cooper, these state parks are perhaps the most visible and tangible New Deal legacy in South Carolina.