

(now the Library of Virginia) and traveling to courthouses across the commonwealth gathering material for *Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion* (1940). Virginia Writers' Project director Eudora Ramsay Richardson shepherded the book through production while sending chapters out to a volunteer review board. Research materials gathered for the project are housed at the Library of Virginia.

“Compressing the story of Virginia within the covers of one volume was a painful task,” she confessed in the book’s preface, “particularly for the state supervisor, whose duty it became to delete more words than she allowed to remain.” What remained were nearly 700 pages of text, including fifteen interpretive essays (one by Douglas Southall Freeman on the spirit of Virginia), fifteen chapters on the commonwealth’s largest cities, and twenty-four detailed tours of the state’s major regions and points of interest. “It is sufficient to say,” one WPA worker observed, that the hefty volume included “everything from George Washington’s birthplace to the nearest first aid station for snake bite.”

Records at the Library of Virginia

As the Virginia Writers' Project came to a close, Eudora Ramsay Richardson approached the Virginia State Library about housing the voluminous records its writers and researchers had created. After a meeting in the summer of 1942, assistant state librarian Randolph W. Church explained to Richardson that the Library would be glad to take the records “for storage and safe-keeping”; however, the Library would not provide filing cabinets, pay for the move, or be responsible for any losses to the records. When the project officially ended on June 30, 1942, Richardson admitted that her work as state supervisor had been difficult, but valuable. “I feel,” she wrote to state librarian Wilmer Hall, “the presentation of Virginia’s part in the struggle for democracy has been wholly worthwhile.”

Staff members in the Archives Research Room are available to assist patrons with requesting manuscript materials from the collection. The life histories and historical inventories are available on microfilm in the West Reading Room and on the Library’s Web site.

Compiled by Jennifer Davis McDaid
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A bibliography of printed and manuscript sources concerning the New Deal is also available on the Library’s Web site. From the home page, click on the Site Index, select the letter “E” for exhibitions, then click on “Legacies of the New Deal in Virginia.”

The Virginia Writers' Project

About the Works Progress Administration

The plan was ambitious: open an office in every state, hire thousands of hungry people desperate for work, and pay them a subsistence wage to document the culture and landscape of the United States and create marketable publications. This was the challenge issued by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program when the Works Progress Administration created the Federal Writers’ Project in 1935. During the Great Depression, the federal government, through the WPA, provided jobs to 8,500,000 unemployed Americans—mostly construction work, repair work, and other types of employment requiring manual labor. The WPA also established federal art, music, theater, and writers’ projects to provide relief jobs for out-of-work artists, musicians, actors, and white-collar and professional workers.

Virginia Projects

The mission of the Federal Writers’ Project, in addition to providing security wages for unemployed clerks, writers, editors, lawyers, teachers, librarians, and archivists, was the compilation of state, local, and specialized guidebooks, as well as anthologies of oral history, folklore, and music. From 1935 to 1942, the Federal Writers’ Project employed as many as 95,000 Virginians and paid approximately 66 million dollars in wages. Many of their early projects were described in an illustrated magazine, *The W.P.A. Record in Virginia* (1936–1937). Among them was a statewide biographical dictionary, which was planned but never written. Preliminary files for the dictionary in the Archives include information on women and African Americans, as well as early Virginia governors.

As director of the Virginia Writers’ Project, Eudora Ramsay Richardson supervised the efforts of eighty workers. In 1936, the monthly earnings of WPA workers in Virginia averaged just \$25.40. Many had college degrees, some were professional writers, and others were teachers and librarians. Writers, editors, researchers, and clerical staff worked together: some gathered information, others composed first drafts, colleagues polished the text, and editors chased down factual and grammatical errors. When the project finally folded in 1942, Richardson proudly tallied up the sum of its accomplishments: 1,619,121 printed words in books, pamphlets, and articles; 560,600 words in historical radio plays broadcast from Virginia stations; and 100,000 words in a book ready for press.

WPA Life Histories, 1936–1941

Another component of the Virginia Writers’ Project involved collecting life histories (Accession 36002, miscellaneous reels 1846–1853). A major aim of the life history project was to gather information about the experiences of Virginians during the Depression. Many interviews conducted in Virginia also capture recollections from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The life histories document family life, health conditions, employment and educational opportunities (or lack thereof), gender roles, and religious beliefs, as well as economic and social conditions in Virginia in the 1930s. The narratives are an important source of information about race relations, changing employment patterns, and the impact of public events and social trends on private lives. They provide a remarkable snapshot of the lives of ordinary people coping with extraordinary times. A searchable database and digital images are also available on the Library’s Web site. From the home page, click on the Site Index, then select the letter “W” for WPA Life Histories.

Between October 1938 and May 1941, the Virginia Writers' Project conducted approximately 1,350 interviews. The staff of the Virginia Writers' Project also transcribed local folklore and folk songs, with more than 3,850 items collected from 62 counties between mid-1937 and mid-1942. Some of the songs were published in *Folk Songs to Sing* (1942), a cooperative undertaking with several other WPA projects—the Virginia Art Project, the Virginia Music Project, and the School Library Project.

The interviews are divided into three categories: life histories, social-ethnic studies, and youth studies. The differences among the three types of interviews are not very distinct, particularly between the life histories and the social-ethnic studies, and the headings on the interviews were sometimes changed by the editors in the Richmond office. The interviews vary considerably in length and style, and the information they contain differs in substance and detail. The life history narratives are generally between two and sixteen pages in length, and are usually written as first-person narratives with commentary by the interviewer. Some of the life histories and most of the youth studies are accompanied by printed survey forms. These forms are always the “youth survey” form, regardless of the age of the interviewee. Less than ten percent of the interviews were conducted with African Americans.

The youth studies were surveys of Virginia's rural and urban youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four who were not attending school at the time of the survey. This was a joint project of the WPA and the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, the State Department of Education, the Virginia Extension Service, and the Virginia Unemployment Compensation Commission. The youth studies surveys sought to obtain information on the demographic, social, and economic situation of young people who had left school, as well as the reasons why they left. A survey of urban black youths was also conducted by the Negro Studies unit at Hampton Institute.

The life history interviews were conducted before the days of easily portable tape recorders, so the stories had to be reconstructed from notes and memory. Writers' Project workers were encouraged to listen for characteristic speech patterns and vernacular language. Most of the resulting interviews were typed, either by the field worker, or upon receipt in the Richmond office, where they underwent an editing process that was at times extensive. Some of the interviews exist in several revised versions, and some were completely rewritten. Fictitious names were sometimes used to protect the identity or privacy of the informants. About seventy life history narratives have been published in *Talk About Trouble: A New Deal Portrait of Virginians in the Great Depression*, edited by Charles L. Perdue Jr. and Nancy J. Martin-Perdue (1996).

Life histories are also available for some of the interviewees, including: Claude W. Anderson, Susie R. C. Byrd, Mack T. Eads, Roland B. Gill, John Tackett Goolrick, Francis V. Green, Lucille B. Jayne, Thomas B. Robertson, Edith C. Skinner, Isaac Michael Warren, and James H. White. The autobiography of James L. Kibler, a WPA writer and Socialist candidate for governor in 1933, is in the Personal Papers collection (Accession 28658).

Virginia Negro Studies Project

On 8 November 1936, an all-black unit of the Virginia Writers' Project was formed under the direction of Roscoe E. Lewis. The objectives of the Virginia Negro Studies project, based at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) and consisting of sixteen workers, were to provide employment for educated African Americans who were on relief and to collect and publish material on African-American life in Virginia from Jamestown to the present. During the next year the staff interviewed more than 300 ex-slaves. About half of the interviews have since been lost. The rest are located in various repositories throughout Virginia.

The interviews, plus research in libraries and courthouses, resulted in the publication of *The Negro in Virginia* in 1940. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, first published in 1976 by the University Press of

Virginia, represents an attempt to assemble all extant Virginia ex-slave narratives. Altogether, twenty percent of the personnel of the Virginia Writers' Project was African American.

Virginia Writers' Project workers collected more than 3,850 folk tales and stories from sixty-two Virginia counties. More than seventy workers participated, with the bulk of the material contributed by just twelve workers. Black field workers collected most of the black folklore. The seven folklore studies that are part of the Library's Life Histories collection are most likely part of the larger Virginia Writers' Project folklore project. Most of this material was transferred to the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia when the WPA closed in 1943. A number of folk studies have been collected in *Virginia Folk Legends*, published by the University Press of Virginia in 1991.

Virginia Historical Inventory

The Virginia Historical Inventory is a collection of photographs, maps, and detailed reports documenting the architectural, cultural, and family histories of thousands of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings in communities across the commonwealth. Workers for the Historical Inventory documented, assessed, and photographed early structures (many of which do not survive today), creating a pictorial and textual record of Virginia's past. It was charged in particular with documenting vernacular architecture and the history of everyday buildings built before 1860.

The Historical Inventory consists of more than 19,300 survey reports, more than 6,200 photographs, and 103 annotated county and city maps. They are available in the West Reading Room on Film 509 (also available on interlibrary loan). A searchable database and digital images also are available on the Library's Web site. From the home page, click on the Site Index, then select the letter “V” for Virginia Historical Inventory. Field workers prepared survey reports on each structure, including details taken from onsite investigations, research in court records and other local resources, and interviews with county residents. There are also reports on cemeteries (often including detailed tombstone information), antiques, historical events and people, as well as transcriptions of land grants, wills, deeds, diaries, correspondence, and family Bible records. The Bible records have been cataloged individually, and copies are also located in the Bible records collection.

Radio Plays

The Writers' Project also took to the airwaves to entertain and educate Virginians. Radio plays employed researchers, writers, actors, and producers, all of whom had found little work during the Depression. The Virginia Writers' Project “took to the air quite by accident,” explained director Eudora Ramsay Richardson, when Richmond radio station WRNL was in need of historical research. The staff of the Virginia Writers' Project researched and produced at least forty-five radio plays for Richmond stations. Plays concerning the history of Southside Virginia were broadcast on WRNL; scripts dramatizing early settlement aired on WMBG; sketches of the lives of Virginia artists and pioneer women were produced for WRTD; and the life of James Monroe was the subject of a play broadcast on WRVA. Listeners gathered around radio sets to hear plays sponsored by the armed forces (including “Uncle Sam's Navy” and “Flying Cadets”) and the Richmond Tuberculosis Association (which sponsored “Red Glory.”)

A series of fifteen-minute radio vignettes, called “The Virginia Traveler,” was developed in cooperation with the Virginia Conservation Commission. Designed to encourage tourism in the Commonwealth, the travelogues were hosted by Eudora Ramsay Richardson and featured a guest, often a representative from a local chamber of commerce. At the end of each broadcast, a Virginia history trivia question was asked; listeners who replied correctly in writing won a copy of the book *Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion*.

Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion

A team of researchers, writers, and fact checkers spent three years digging in the collections of the Virginia State Library