Federal Writers' Project

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The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was a United States federal government project to fund written work and support writers during the Great Depression. It was part of the Works Projects Administration, a New Deal program. It was one of four New Deal arts programs known collectively as Federal One. FWP was particularly charged with employing writers, editors, historians, researchers, art critics, archaeologists, geologists and cartographers. Some 6,600 individuals were employed by the FWP.

Established in July 27 1935, the Writers' Project operated under journalist and theatrical producer Henry Alsberg, and later John D. Newsome, and produced local histories, oral histories, ethnographies, children's books and 48 state guides to America (plus Alaska Territory, Puerto Rico and D.C.)—the American Guide Series publications contained detailed histories of each state with descriptions of every city and town. In every state the personnel comprised a small non-relief staff of editors and a much larger group of fieldworkers drawn from local rolls; many of these had never graduated high school, but most had formerly held white collar jobs of some sort. Among the thousands who worked on the project were Conrad Aiken, Nelson Algren, Nathan Asch, Arna Bontemps, John Cheever, Kenneth Rexroth, Studs Terkel, and Richard Wright. Blakey (2005) estimates that at any one time the Indiana office had fewer than 150 men and women on the payroll. Fieldworkers made about eighty dollars a month, working twenty to thirty hours a week. A majority were women. Very few African Americans worked for any state project. As Blakey notes, "there were very few on the relief rolls who claimed literary expertise in the 1930s, so the FWP had few to choose from" (Blakey p. 42).
The most important product was employment, but the project also produced American Guide Series volumes for each state. The format was uniform, comprising essays on the state's history and culture, descriptions of its major cities, automobile tours of important attractions, and a portfolio of photographs.

Federal sponsorship for the Federal Writers' Project continued until 1939, though the program was permitted to continue under state sponsorship until 1943.

**Famous FWP participants**

- Conrad Aiken
- Nelson Algren
- Saul Bellow
- Max Bodenheim
- John Cheever
- Loren Eiseley
- Ralph Ellison
- Zora Neale Hurston
- Weldon Kees
- Claude McKay
- May Swenson
- Richard Wright
- Frank Yerby

**Titles in the American Guide Series**

**Cities**

- *Houston, a history and guide*, 1942 [Houston, TX]
- *Lincoln City Guide*, 1937. [Lincoln, NE]

**States**

- Maryland: A Guide to the Old Line State, 1940.
- New Mexico: A Guide to the Colorful State, 1940.
- The Ohio Guide, 1940.
- Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State, 1941
- Oregon: The End of the Trail, 1940.
- Texas: A Guide to the Lone Star State, 1940.
- Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion, 1940.
- Washington, City and Capital, 1937
Regions and territories, etc.

- New York Panorama, 1938.
- The WPA Guide to the Minnesota Arrowhead Country, 1941.

Further reading

