Today in History - June 16

June 16

Select date June 16 Go

Today's Stories: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers | A New Deal: The First 100 Days

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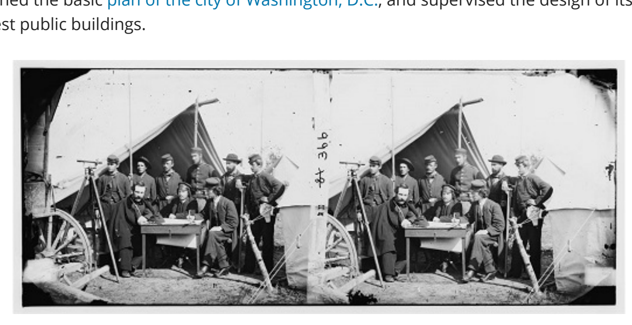
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

On **June 16**, 1775, George Washington was appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army by the Second Continental Congress. That same day, the Congress authorized the creation of the post of chief engineer for the army, in anticipation of upcoming battles with British forces. The engineers' work building fortifications, surveying terrain, and clearing roads during the war proved so valuable to the Revolutionary forces that the Congress resolved, four years later, based on a recommendation from the Board of War:

> *Resolved, That the engineers in the service of the United States shall be formed into a corps, and styled the "corps of engineers;" and shall take rank and enjoy the same rights, honours, and privileges, with the other troops…That a commandant of the corps of engineers shall be appointed by Congress, to whom their orders, and those of the Commander in Chief, shall be addressed…*
>
> **March 11, 1779.** In *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*. A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875

The future of the corps was even more firmly assured in 1802, when President Thomas Jefferson established the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the first U.S. school of engineering. Until 1866, the superintendent of West Point was an engineer officer. One of West Point's missions was to train generations of military engineers to participate in both military and civilian engineering projects on behalf of the nation.

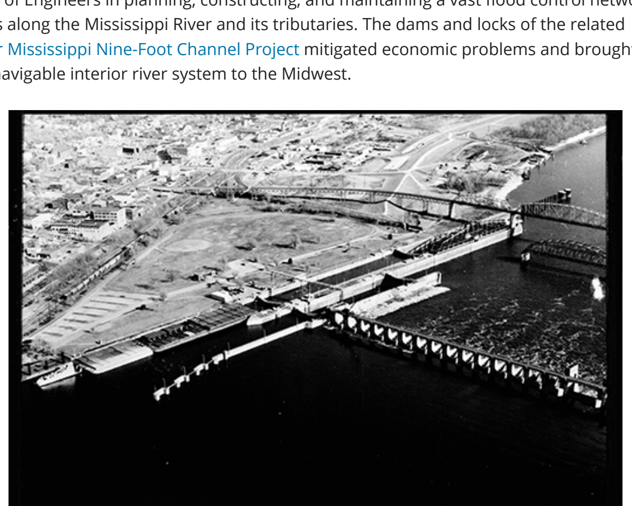
The Army Corps of Engineers played an active role in the development and/or completion of many sites in the nation's capital, including the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, Rock Creek Park, and the Library of Congress. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a Frenchman who had served as an engineer during the American Revolutionary War, designed the basic plan of the city of Washington, D.C., and supervised the design of its earliest public buildings.



Yorktown, Va. vicinity. Topographical Engineers, Camp Winfield Scott. James F. Gibson, photographer, May 2, 1862. Civil War. Prints & Photographs Division

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has engaged in various civil construction projects and has long maintained a national role in the development of coastal fortifications, lighthouses, and waterways; in the improvement of rivers and harbors; and in the design, building, and maintenance of structures such as bridges, canals, levees, locks, and hydroelectric dams and roads.

To relieve unemployment during the Great Depression, the U.S. Government engaged the Corps of Engineers in planning, constructing, and maintaining a vast flood control network of levees along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. The dams and locks of the related Upper Mississippi Nine-Foot Channel Project mitigated economic problems and brought a fully navigable interior river system to the Midwest.



Aerial View of Lock and Dam, Looking Southeast. ca. 1980. Upper Mississippi River 9-Foot Channel Project, Lock & Dam 26 Alton, Madison County, IL. Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey. Prints & Photographs Division

During World War II, corpsmen worked on military engineering projects in the European and Asian-Pacific theaters—building bases, landing strips, storage depots, and hospitals. The corps both facilitated the mobility of allied troops and countered the mobility of enemy troops. In 1942, they eked out a 1,500-mile trail through the Pacific Northwest, creating a military supply route that became known as the Alcan (Alaska-Canadian) or Alaska Highway. The corps helped to build the nuclear research facilities in the U.S. that were used by participants in the Manhattan Project to develop the Atomic Bomb.

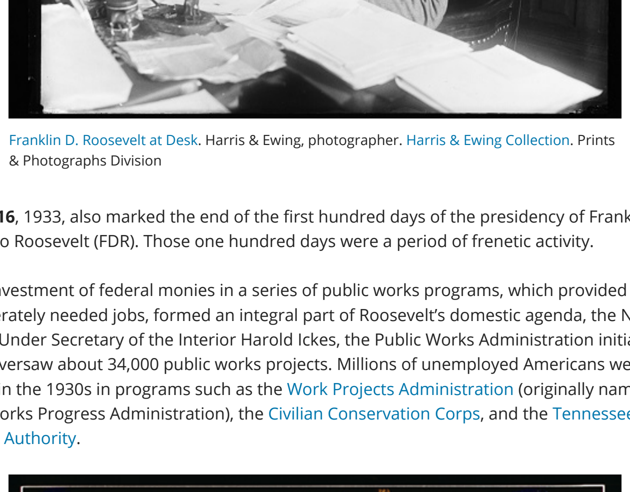
Today, the corps continues its work in the management of water resources, the development of civil and military infrastructure, and the response to natural and man-made disasters, and works with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to clean up contaminated sites.

Learn More

- Search on *Army Corps of Engineers* in Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey to view various projects of the corps.
- Search on the keyword *engineer* in the George Washington Papers to find documents recounting the activities of military engineers in the American Revolution
- Search for newspaper accounts of the activities of the *Army Corps of Engineers* throughout the country in Chronicling America, the Library's online collection of historic newspapers.
- Explore the Veterans History Project, to find collections referencing the work of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from World War I to the present day (A tip: limit results to digitized collections by selecting "Yes" in the field labeled "Digitized Collection?").
- Visit the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers website to learn more about their history and access their Digital Library.

A New Deal: The First 100 Days

Following his inauguration on March 4, Roosevelt immediately sought to stem the financial panic that had begun with the stock market crash of 1929 and to restore public confidence. He started by closing the nation's banks on March 6. On **June 16**, 1933, FDR signed the Banking Act, which separated commercial banking from investment banking and established the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. He also signed the Farm Credit Act, the Emergency Railroad Transportation Act, and the National Industrial Recovery Act (which created the Public Works Administration).

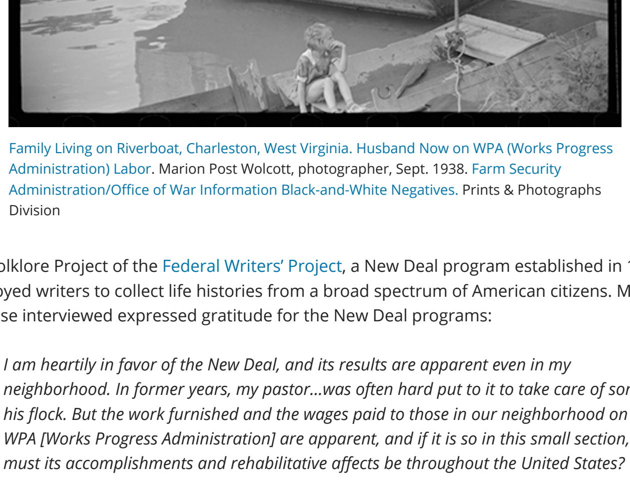


Franklin D. Roosevelt at Desk. Harris & Ewing, photographer. Harris & Ewing Collection. Prints & Photographs Division

June 16, 1933, also marked the end of the first hundred days of the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). Those one hundred days were a period of frenetic activity.

The investment of federal monies in a series of public works programs, which provided desperately needed jobs, formed an integral part of Roosevelt's domestic agenda, the New Deal. Under Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, the Public Works Administration initiated and oversaw about 34,000 public works projects. Millions of unemployed Americans went to work in the 1930s in programs such as the Work Projects Administration (originally named the Works Progress Administration), the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Electric Phosphate Smelting Furnace Used to Make Elemental Phosphorus…vicinity of Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Alfred T. Palmer, photographer, June 1942. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Color Photographs. Prints & Photographs Division

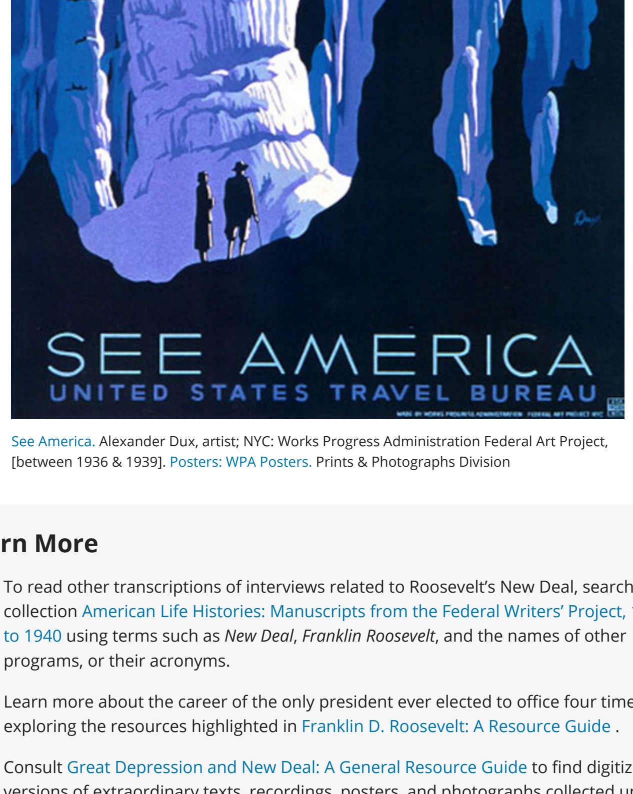


Family Living on Riverboat, Charleston, West Virginia. Husband Now on WPA (Works Progress Administration) Labor. Marion Post Wolcott, photographer, Sept. 1938. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives. Prints & Photographs Division

The Folklore Project of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal program established in 1935, employed writers to collect life histories from a broad spectrum of American citizens. Many of those interviewed expressed gratitude for the New Deal programs:

> *I am heartily in favor of the New Deal, and its results are apparent even in my neighborhood. In former years, my pastor…was often hard put to it to take care of some of his flock. But the work furnished and the wages paid to those in our neighborhood on the WPA [Works Progress Administration] are apparent, and if it is so in this small section, what must its accomplishments and rehabilitative affects be throughout the United States?*
>
> "Mrs. Eulalia McCranie." Rose Shepherd, interviewer; Jacksonville, Florida, ca. February 23, 1939. American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940. Manuscript Division

> *To my mind one of the greatest accomplishments of the New Deal has been the organization of the Civilian Conservation Camps. The training given the boys will be of lasting benefit. They have changed many a boy from a liability to a valuable asset to his country. They have kept thousands of boys off the roads just idly roaming over the country…*
>
> "Women and the Changing Times." Mrs. J.R. Byrd, interviewee; Mrs. Daisy Thompson, interviewer; Augusta, Georgia, February 8 & 16, 1940. American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940. Manuscript Division



See America. Alexander Dux, artist; NYC: Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project, [between 1936 & 1939]. Posters: WPA Posters. Prints & Photographs Division

Learn More

- To read other transcriptions of interviews related to Roosevelt's New Deal, search the collection American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940 using terms such as *New Deal*, *Franklin Roosevelt*, and the names of other programs, or their acronyms.
- Learn more about the career of the only president ever elected to office four times by exploring the resources highlighted in Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Resource Guide .
- Consult Great Depression and New Deal: A General Resource Guide to find digitized versions of extraordinary texts, recordings, posters, and photographs collected under the auspices of New Deal programs and available from the Library's Web site, including collections such as:
  - California Gold: Northern California Folk Music from the Thirties Collected by Sidney Robertson Cowell
  - Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives and color photographs.
  - Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey yields photographs and data pages of construction projects undertaken during this time. To find these, search the collection on the phrase *New Deal.*
  - Federal Theatre Project, 1935 to 1939: This online presentation includes over 13,000 images of items selected from the Federal Theatre Project Collection at the Library of Congress.
  - Voices from the Dust Bowl: the Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Migrant Worker Collection, 1940 to 1941 is an online presentation of selections from a multi-format ethnographic field collection documenting the everyday life of residents of Farm Security Administration (FSA) migrant work camps in central California in 1940 and 1941.
  - Posters: WPA Posters: This collection consists of 907 posters produced from 1936 to 1943 by various branches of the WPA.
- See also the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and the New Deal: A Resource Guide.

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