

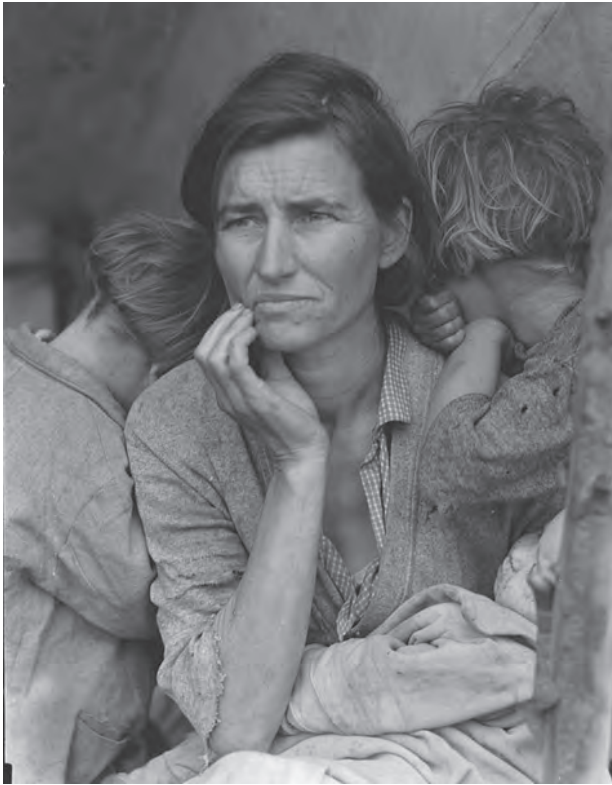
communities faced the painful, frightening, and often bewildering collapse of the economic institutions on which they depended. The more fortunate were spared the worst effects, and a few even profited from it, but by the end of 1932, the crisis had become so deep and so widespread that most Americans had suffered directly. Markets crashed through no fault of their own. Workers were plunged into poverty because of impersonal forces for which they shared no responsibility. With no safety net, they were thrown into economic chaos.

With rampant unemployment and declining wages, Americans slashed expenses. The fortunate could survive by simply deferring vacations and regular consumer purchases. Middle- and working-class Americans might rely on disappearing credit at neighborhood stores, default on utility bills, or skip meals. Those who could borrowed from relatives or took in boarders in homes or “doubled up” in tenements. The most desperate, the chronically unemployed, encamped on public or marginal lands in “Hooverilles,” spontaneous shantytowns that dotted America’s cities, depending on bread lines and street-corner peddling. Poor women and young children entered the labor force, as they always had. The ideal of the “male breadwinner” was always a fiction for poor Americans, but the Depression decimated millions of new workers. The emotional and psychological shocks of unemployment and underemployment only added to the shocking material depravities of the Depression. Social workers and charity officials, for instance, often found the unemployed suffering from feelings of futility, anger, bitterness, confusion, and loss of pride. Such feelings affected the rural poor no less than the urban.<sup>15</sup>

## VI. Migration and the Great Depression

On the Great Plains, environmental catastrophe deepened America’s longstanding agricultural crisis and magnified the tragedy of the Depression. Beginning in 1932, severe droughts hit from Texas to the Dakotas and lasted until at least 1936. The droughts compounded years of agricultural mismanagement. To grow their crops, Plains farmers had plowed up natural ground cover that had taken ages to form over the surface of the dry Plains states. Relatively wet decades had protected them, but, during the early 1930s, without rain, the exposed fertile topsoil turned to dust, and without sod or windbreaks such as trees, rolling winds churned the dust into massive storms that blotted out the sky, choked settlers and livestock, and rained dirt not only across the region but as far east as





This iconic 1936 photograph by Dorothea Lange of a destitute, thirty-two-year-old mother of seven made real the suffering of millions during the Great Depression. Library of Congress.

Washington, D.C., New England, and ships on the Atlantic Ocean. The Dust Bowl, as the region became known, exposed all-too-late the need for conservation. The region's farmers, already hit by years of foreclosures and declining commodity prices, were decimated.<sup>16</sup> For many in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas who were "baked out, blown out, and broke," their only hope was to travel west to California, whose rains still brought bountiful harvests and—potentially—jobs for farmworkers. It was an exodus. Oklahoma lost 440,000 people, or a full 18.4 percent of its 1930 population, to outmigration.<sup>17</sup>

Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* became one of the most enduring images of the Dust Bowl and the ensuing westward exodus. Lange, a photographer for the Farm Security Administration, captured the image at a migrant farmworker camp in Nipomo, California, in 1936. In the photograph a young mother stares out with a worried, weary expression. She was a migrant, having left her home in Oklahoma to follow the crops to the Golden State. She took part in what many in the mid-1930s were beginning to recognize as a vast migration of families out of the

southwestern Plains states. In the image she cradles an infant and supports two older children, who cling to her. Lange's photo encapsulated the nation's struggle. The subject of the photograph seemed used to hard work but down on her luck, and uncertain about what the future might hold.

The Okies, as such westward migrants were disparagingly called by their new neighbors, were the most visible group who were on the move during the Depression, lured by news and rumors of jobs in far-flung regions of the country. By 1932, sociologists were estimating that millions of men were on the roads and rails traveling the country. Economists sought to quantify the movement of families from the Plains. Popular magazines and newspapers were filled with stories of homeless boys and the veterans-turned-migrants of the Bonus Army commandeering box-cars. Popular culture, such as William Wellman's 1933 film, *Wild Boys of the Road*, and, most famously, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939 and turned into a hit movie a year later, captured the Depression's dislocated populations.

These years witnessed the first significant reversal in the flow of people between rural and urban areas. Thousands of city dwellers fled the jobless cities and moved to the country looking for work. As relief efforts



During her assignment as a photographer for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Dorothea Lange documented the movement of migrant families forced from their homes by drought and economic depression. This family, captured by Lange in 1938, was in the process of traveling 124 miles by foot, across Oklahoma, because the father was ill and therefore unable to receive relief or WPA work. Library of Congress.

floundered, many state and local officials threw up barriers to migration, making it difficult for newcomers to receive relief or find work. Some state legislatures made it a crime to bring poor migrants into the state and allowed local officials to deport migrants to neighboring states. In the winter of 1935–1936, California, Florida, and Colorado established “border blockades” to block poor migrants from their states and reduce competition with local residents for jobs. A billboard outside Tulsa, Oklahoma, informed potential migrants that there were “NO JOBS in California” and warned them to “KEEP OUT.”<sup>18</sup>

Sympathy for migrants, however, accelerated late in the Depression with the publication of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Joad family’s struggles drew attention to the plight of Depression-era migrants and, just a month after the nationwide release of the film version, Congress created the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. Starting in 1940, the committee held widely publicized hearings. But it was too late. Within a year of its founding, defense industries were already gearing up in the wake of the outbreak of World War II, and the “problem” of migration suddenly became a *lack* of migrants needed to fill war industries. Such relief was nowhere to be found in the 1930s.

Americans meanwhile feared foreign workers willing to work for even lower wages. The *Saturday Evening Post* warned that foreign immigrants, who were “compelled to accept employment on any terms and conditions offered,” would exacerbate the economic crisis.<sup>19</sup> On September 8, 1930, the Hoover administration issued a press release on the administration of immigration laws “under existing conditions of unemployment.” Hoover instructed consular officers to scrutinize carefully the visa applications of those “likely to become public charges” and suggested that this might include denying visas to most, if not all, alien laborers and artisans. The crisis itself had stifled foreign immigration, but such restrictive and exclusionary actions in the first years of the Depression intensified its effects. The number of European visas issued fell roughly 60 percent while deportations dramatically increased. Between 1930 and 1932, fifty-four thousand people were deported. An additional forty-four thousand deportable aliens left “voluntarily.”<sup>20</sup>

Exclusionary measures hit Mexican immigrants particularly hard. The State Department made a concerted effort to reduce immigration from Mexico as early as 1929, and Hoover’s executive actions arrived the following year. Officials in the Southwest led a coordinated effort to push out Mexican immigrants. In Los Angeles, the Citizens Committee



on Coordination of Unemployment Relief began working closely with federal officials in early 1931 to conduct deportation raids, while the Los Angeles County Department of Charities began a simultaneous drive to repatriate Mexicans and Mexican Americans on relief, negotiating a charity rate with the railroads to return Mexicans “voluntarily” to their mother country. According to the federal census, from 1930 to 1940 the Mexican-born population living in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas fell from 616,998 to 377,433. Franklin Roosevelt did not indulge anti-immigrant sentiment as willingly as Hoover had. Under the New Deal, the Immigration and Naturalization Service halted some of the Hoover administration’s most divisive practices, but with jobs suddenly scarce, hostile attitudes intensified, and official policies less than welcoming, immigration plummeted and deportations rose. Over the course of the Depression, more people left the United States than entered it.<sup>21</sup>

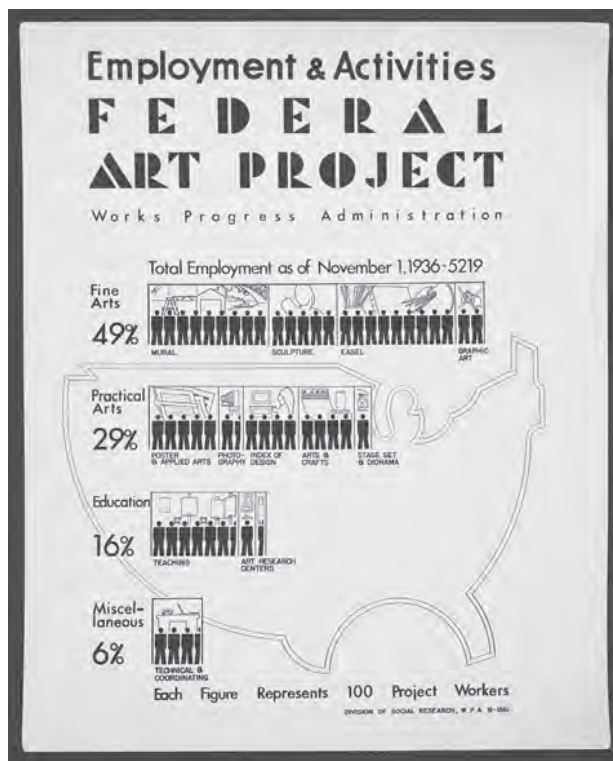
## VII. Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the “First” New Deal

The early years of the Depression were catastrophic. The crisis, far from relenting, deepened each year. Unemployment peaked at 25 percent in 1932. With no end in sight, and with private firms crippled and charities overwhelmed by the crisis, Americans looked to their government as the last barrier against starvation, hopelessness, and perpetual poverty.

Few presidential elections in modern American history have been more consequential than that of 1932. The United States was struggling through the third year of the Depression, and exasperated voters overthrew Hoover in a landslide to elect the Democratic governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt came from a privileged background in New York’s Hudson River Valley (his distant cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, became president while Franklin was at Harvard). Franklin Roosevelt embarked on a slow but steady ascent through state and national politics. In 1913, he was appointed assistant secretary of the navy, a position he held during the defense emergency of World War I. In the course of his rise, in the summer of 1921, Roosevelt suffered a sudden bout of lower-body pain and paralysis. He was diagnosed with polio. The disease left him a paraplegic, but, encouraged and assisted by his wife, Eleanor, Roosevelt sought therapeutic treatment and maintained sufficient political connections to reenter politics. In 1928, Roosevelt won election as governor of New York. He oversaw the rise of the Depression and drew from progressivism to address the economic crisis. During his







Posters like this 1936 production showing the extent of the Federal Art Project were used to prove the value of the WPA—and, by extension, the entire New Deal—to the American people. Wikimedia.

gubernatorial tenure, Roosevelt introduced the first comprehensive unemployment relief program and helped pioneer efforts to expand public utilities. He also relied on like-minded advisors. For example, Frances Perkins, then commissioner of the state's labor department, successfully advocated pioneering legislation that enhanced workplace safety and reduced the use of child labor in factories. Perkins later accompanied Roosevelt to Washington and served as the nation's first female secretary of labor.<sup>22</sup>

On July 1, 1932, Roosevelt, the newly designated presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, delivered the first and one of the most famous on-site acceptance speeches in American presidential history. Building to a conclusion, he promised, "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people." Newspaper editors seized on the phrase "new deal," and it entered the American political lexicon as shorthand for Roosevelt's program to address the Great Depression.<sup>23</sup> There were, however, few hints in his political campaign that suggested the size and scope of the "New Deal." Regardless, Roosevelt crushed Hoover. He won more counties than any previous candidate in American

history. He spent the months between his election and inauguration traveling, planning, and assembling a team of advisors, the famous Brain Trust of academics and experts, to help him formulate a plan of attack. On March 4, 1933, in his first inaugural address, Roosevelt famously declared, “This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”<sup>24</sup>

Roosevelt’s reassuring words would have rung hollow if he had not taken swift action against the economic crisis. In his first days in office, Roosevelt and his advisors prepared, submitted, and secured congressional enactment of numerous laws designed to arrest the worst of the Great Depression. His administration threw the federal government headlong into the fight against the Depression.

Roosevelt immediately looked to stabilize the collapsing banking system. He declared a national “bank holiday” closing American banks and set to work pushing the Emergency Banking Act swiftly through Congress. On March 12, the night before select banks reopened under stricter federal guidelines, Roosevelt appeared on the radio in the first of his Fireside Chats. The addresses, which the president continued delivering through four terms, were informal, even personal. Roosevelt used his airtime to explain New Deal legislation, to encourage confidence in government action, and to mobilize the American people’s support. In the first chat, Roosevelt described the new banking safeguards and asked the public to place their trust and their savings in banks. Americans responded and across the country, deposits outpaced withdrawals. The act was a major success. In June, Congress passed the Glass-Steagall Banking Act, which instituted federal deposit insurance and barred the mixing of commercial and investment banking.<sup>25</sup>

Stabilizing the banks was only a first step. In the remainder of his First Hundred Days, Roosevelt and his congressional allies focused especially on relief for suffering Americans.<sup>26</sup> Congress debated, amended, and passed what Roosevelt proposed. As one historian noted, the president “directed the entire operation like a seasoned field general.”<sup>27</sup> And despite some questions over the constitutionality of many of his actions, Americans and their congressional representatives conceded that the crisis demanded swift and immediate action. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) employed young men on conservation and reforestation projects; the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) provided direct cash assistance to state relief agencies struggling to care for the



unemployed;<sup>28</sup> the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) built a series of hydroelectric dams along the Tennessee River as part of a comprehensive program to economically develop a chronically depressed region;<sup>29</sup> and several agencies helped home and farm owners refinance their mortgages. And Roosevelt wasn't done.

The heart of Roosevelt's early recovery program consisted of two massive efforts to stabilize and coordinate the American economy: the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the National Recovery Administration (NRA). The AAA, created in May 1933, aimed to raise the prices of agricultural commodities (and hence farmers' income) by offering cash incentives to voluntarily limit farm production (decreasing supply, thereby raising prices).<sup>30</sup> The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which created the NRA in June 1933, suspended antitrust laws to allow businesses to establish "codes" that would coordinate prices, regulate production levels, and establish conditions of employment to curtail "cutthroat competition." In exchange for these exemptions, businesses agreed to provide reasonable wages and hours, end child labor, and allow workers the right to unionize. Participating businesses earned the right to display a placard with the NRA's Blue Eagle, showing their cooperation in the effort to combat the Great Depression.<sup>31</sup>

The programs of the First Hundred Days stabilized the American economy and ushered in a robust though imperfect recovery. GDP climbed once more, but even as output increased, unemployment remained stubbornly high. Though the unemployment rate dipped from its high in 1933, when Roosevelt was inaugurated, vast numbers remained out of work. If the economy could not put people back to work, the New Deal would try. The Civil Works Administration (CWA) and, later, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) put unemployed men and women to work on projects designed and proposed by local governments. The Public Works Administration (PWA) provided grants-in-aid to local governments for large infrastructure projects, such as bridges, tunnels, schoolhouses, libraries, and America's first federal public housing projects. Together, they provided not only tangible projects of immense public good but employment for millions. The New Deal was reshaping much of the nation.<sup>32</sup>

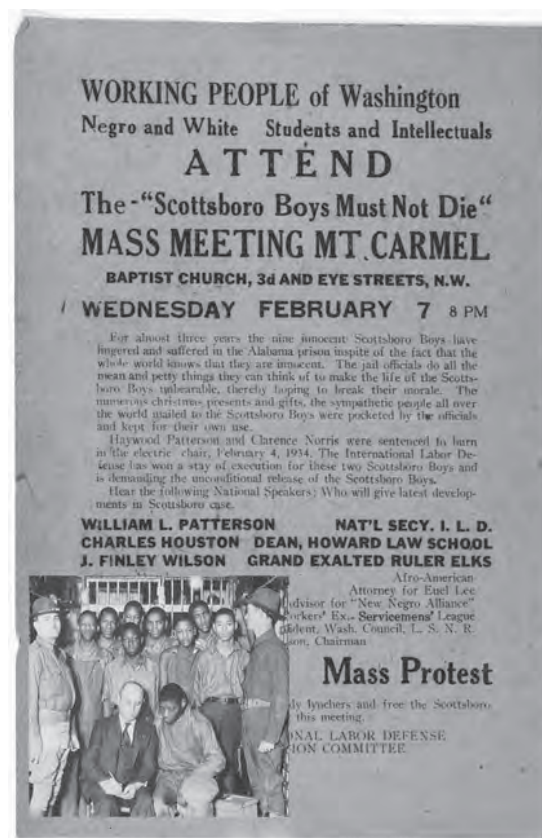
## VIII. The New Deal in the South

The impact of initial New Deal legislation was readily apparent in the South, a region of perpetual poverty especially plagued by the Depression.





The accusation of rape brought against the so-called Scottsboro Boys, pictured here with their attorney in 1932, generated controversy across the country. Wikipedia.



In 1929 the average per capita income in the American Southeast was \$365, the lowest in the nation. Southern farmers averaged \$183 per year at a time when farmers on the West Coast made more than four times that.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, they were trapped into the production of cotton and corn, crops that depleted the soil and returned ever-diminishing profits. Despite the ceaseless efforts of civic boosters, what little industry the South had remained low-wage, low-skilled, and primarily extractive. Southern workers made significantly less than their national counterparts: 75 percent of nonsouthern textile workers, 60 percent of iron and steel workers, and a paltry 45 percent of lumber workers. At the time of the crash, southerners were already underpaid, underfed, and undereducated.<sup>34</sup>

Major New Deal programs were designed with the South in mind. FDR hoped that by drastically decreasing the amount of land devoted to cotton, the AAA would arrest its long-plummeting price decline. Farmers plowed up existing crops and left fields fallow, and the market price did

rise. But in an agricultural world of landowners and landless farmworkers (such as tenants and sharecroppers), the benefits of the AAA bypassed the southerners who needed them most. The government relied on landowners and local organizations to distribute money fairly to those most affected by production limits, but many owners simply kicked tenants and croppers off their land, kept the subsidy checks for keeping those acres fallow, and reinvested the profits in mechanical farming equipment that further suppressed the demand for labor. Instead of making farming profitable again, the AAA pushed landless southern farmworkers off the land.<sup>35</sup>

But Roosevelt's assault on southern poverty took many forms. Southern industrial practices attracted much attention. The NRA encouraged higher wages and better conditions. It began to suppress the rampant use of child labor in southern mills and, for the first time, provided federal protection for unionized workers all across the country. Those gains were eventually solidified in the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which set a national minimum wage of \$0.25/hour (eventually rising to \$0.40/hour). The minimum wage disproportionately affected low-paid southern workers and brought southern wages within the reach of northern wages.<sup>36</sup>

The president's support for unionization further impacted the South. Southern industrialists had proven themselves ardent foes of unionization, particularly in the infamous southern textile mills. In 1934, when workers at textile mills across the southern Piedmont struck over low wages and long hours, owners turned to local and state authorities to quash workers' groups, even as they recruited thousands of strikebreakers from the many displaced farmers swelling industrial centers looking for work. But in 1935 the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, guaranteed the rights of most workers to unionize and bargain collectively. And so unionized workers, backed by the support of the federal government and determined to enforce the reforms of the New Deal, pushed for higher wages, shorter hours, and better conditions. With growing success, union members came to see Roosevelt as a protector of workers' rights. Or, as one union leader put it, an "agent of God."<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most successful New Deal program in the South was the TVA, an ambitious program to use hydroelectric power, agricultural and industrial reform, flood control, economic development, education, and healthcare to radically remake the impoverished watershed region of the Tennessee River. Though the area of focus was limited, Roosevelt's TVA

