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A Legacy of Civic Improvement: The WPA and Other Public Works

Keeping water and sewer lines in good repair helps maintain public health in large cities and small. These workers are part of the crew which reconstructed Sewer #2 in Toledo during January of 1953. Harold H. Harmon, photographer. Center for Archival Collections, General Photograph Collection.

The hallmark of any civilization is its public construction. Roads, bridges, and lighthouses ensure safer, easier transportation for people and commerce. Water and sewer lines enable cities to supply their large populations with clean water. Public buildings such as fire stations, libraries, and courthouses provide a place to house and administer the community’s resources. They are constructed with public money for the common good. Taken for granted and almost “invisible” while in use, such buildings become hallmarks of their communities and a source of pride.

The Ohio Electric interurban bridge at Waterville, shown here under construction in 1906, was part of a public transportation system which provided service to northwest Ohio cities. Betty B. Becker Collection (MS 709).

As soon as permanent settlement began in northwest Ohio, trails and roads were blazed from cabin to village. It quickly became clear that the Great Black Swamp posed special problems in road construction. In dry seasons and during winter when the ground was frozen, travel was easy. But when spring rains soaked the area, the roads became impassable. During the 1820’s, the Maumee and Western Reserve Road was said to have a tavern inn for every mile of the distance between Perrysburg and Fremont to serve the needs of struggling travelers. By the late 1830s, state aid surfaced key routes with macadam or planking and there was at least one toll road in the region.
Although WPA buildings often have a streamlined art deco appearance, fanciful work appeared, too. For instance, the Municipal Pool post offices, courthouses, and public service buildings have been constructed with utility and economy as their foremost concern. Only time will tell whether these buildings will come to be as revered as their pre-war predecessors.

Handwritten records were adapted to typewriters, but are not adapted to needs of computers and telecommunications. Today's new population continues to grow and requires different services than in the past. The older buildings, designed to accommodate that population, were no longer large enough to function effectively for the larger population who expected more and better government services.

The gleaming courthouses and city halls erected in the 1870s were no longer large enough to function effectively for the larger population who expected more and better government services sixty years later. An economic Depression gripped the country, putting as much as one-third of the population out of work. President Roosevelt's New Deal created an "alphabet soup" of government programs to address the nation's needs, and one of the most effective was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). By 1939, Ohio had completed or had in progress over 1,000 projects, the largest number of any state in the union. Each project was to be sponsored by a public agency which would continue the operation of the proposed facility after construction was completed. At least ninety percent of its workers had to be drawn from the public relief rolls. Preference was given to projects which could recycle available building materials. Architects were encouraged to avoid elaborate decoration, in order to allow unskilled workers to be employed.

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Sines World War II, the largest single public works project undertaken in the United States has been the interstate highway system, originally conceived as a civil defense resource during the Cold War. Despite public demand for less government more efficiently run, the population continues to grow and requires different services than in the past. The older buildings, designed to accommodate handwritten records, were adapted to typewriters, but are not adapted to needs of computers and telecommunications. Today's new post offices, courthouses, and public service buildings have been constructed with utility and economy as their foremost concern. Only time will tell whether these buildings will come to be as revered as their pre-war predecessors.

---Lee N. McLard

THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ISSUE document construction and public works in northwest Ohio.