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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 firestations, 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.



◀ The Buckeye Traction Ditcher Model 301 digs a drainage trench on a farm in 1946. The original company, founded in Bowling Green in 1893, grew to become the largest tile ditching and construction trenching company in the world. A version of the machine is still in production. The Buckeye Traction Ditcher/Garwood Industries Collection (MS 380) is among the many resources available to researchers at the CAC.

Draining the swamp through ditch-digging was crucial to successful farming and improved health for local residents. Standing water made fieldwork impossible and provided a breeding ground for malaria-carrying mosquitos. Early records are filled with disputes among neighbors over the proper maintenance of ditches. Indeed, in some counties the ditch records are among the most complete, testimony to their continuing importance. Although local governments let contracts for much road construction, early efforts were sometimes paid for through subscription, and in a cash-poor society like that of the early days of settlement, "payment" was responsibly maintaining the ditches surrounding your own property. Today, County Engineers maintain the official records of roads and ditches constructed within their jurisdiction.

A long period following the Civil War was marked by an improved economy and a growing population. At last, enough money could be raised through taxes, subscriptions, and bonds to replace frame buildings with substantial ones of brick and stone. Courthouses, city halls, and city service buildings such as fire and police stations were constructed. Although there was the usual grumbling about expense, communities took great pride in these buildings. They demonstrated that these cities had "arrived" and were no longer on the frontier. Each dedication was an opportunity to boast that their public buildings were the grandest in the region. Cities and counties kept careful records of contracts let, bills paid, and construction completed. Newspapers gave detailed descriptions of progress, recorded public reaction, and served as the chief boosters of their communities' civic pride.

The WPA was responsible for the construction of many projects designed for long-term public benefit. The amphitheater (pictured here in 1936) was one of several structures built at the Toledo Zoo. Center for Archival Collections, General Photograph Collection. ▶



By 1930, roads first constructed for horse-and-buggy travel could no longer be adequately adapted for the growing automobile traffic. 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.

Although WPA buildings often have a streamlined art deco appearance, fanciful work appeared, too. For instance, the Municipal Pool at Columbus Grove (Putnam County), recently added to the National Register of Historic Places, features medieval-style towers. The 5,000 seat amphitheater and five other buildings at the Toledo Zoo were likewise constructed with WPA funds and used materials salvaged from the Miami & Erie Canal locks, the first Toledo Hospital, and demolished railroad car shops. Other WPA projects in northwest Ohio include the post offices at Ottawa and Paulding. Although the public often sniffed at these "make work" projects, in truth the WPA allowed communities to construct public buildings and recreational facilities which otherwise might never have been built. That they have been used hard and well since that time is proof of their continuing usefulness and the quality of their construction. The best source for information on WPA projects is in the locality where the project was undertaken and in federal records.

Since 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. McLaird

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