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Institutional History

The Federal Writers' Project was originally established in 1935 as part of the Works Progress Administration, a depression era program established to alleviate unemployment. Initially designed to produce a series of state and local guidebooks, the writer's project subsequently redirected its efforts toward compiling collections of folklore, surveys of ethnic groups, and narratives of former slaves. Every state had its own office for the Writers' Project, which reported to the national office in Washington, D.C. As a result of cutbacks in the budget in 1939, Congress transferred primary responsibility for the Federal Writers' Project to state government, provided they could supply 25 percent of their own funding. The project continued in all forty eight states as the "WPA Writers' Program", until all WPA projects were terminated in 1943.

As part of the New Jersey Writer's Program (Project), the New Jersey Ethnological Survey began operating in July 1938 under the direction of Charles W. Churchill and Vivian P. Mintz. Concentrating on Newark and nearby communities, which were its base of operations, the survey sought to research and publish a series of reports on the history and present condition of New Jersey's major ethnic communities. Fieldworkers collected data from a number of sources: questionnaires, case histories, census data and a variety of published materials. A special area of concentration, the study of Negroes in Newark, Atlantic City and Montclair, was co sponsored by the New Jersey Urban League.

Though the New Jersey Writer's Program did not end until 1943, the Ethnological Survey was jeopardized early on, when staff cutbacks in the FWP led it to shift personnel to higher priority projects. In addition, conflicting philosophies on the proper focus of the survey caused internal dissension. For Churchill and Mintz, the questionnaires, which focused on prejudices among different ethnic groups, formed the heart of the survey's work. Federal authorities, however, preferred to concentrate on collecting case histories in order to project a more optimistic portrayal of ethnic life. WPA records held by the National Archives suggest that the project formally ended in September 1939. However, this collection's records suggest that survey work continued on an informal basis: some familiar names remained connected to the project, though regular writers for the Writers' Program may have carried on most of the work after the ethnological survey was officially disbanded. All work on the survey, whether official or unofficial, ended by the end of 1940, before it was able to publish any of its projected reports on New Jersey ethnic communities.

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Content Note

When the WPA Writers' Program shutdown, it deposited the records of the Ethnological Survey in the New Jersey State Library, which subsequently transferred them to the state archives. Because the survey disbanded before completing any publications, its files consist largely of research notes and unfinished drafts of proposed reports. (A major exception to this was the Negro study for Newark, which had the material organized into nearly completed chapters for a final report.) Compounding this problem is the fact that the original order of the files has been lost, if in fact a specific order ever existed. In order to remedy these defects, the files have been essentially rearranged into the following series: 1) general 2) ethnic files and 3) geographic files. The original folder order, such as it existed immediately prior to rearrangement, has been preserved by noting old folder numbers in the attached file listing. In addition, duplicates, transcripts of published works, and other ephemeral material has been discarded from the collection.

The general series consists of files dealing with the ethnic survey administration, general reference materials used for all groups, and sample questionnaires and data from both the general survey and the special survey on foreign language press. The general questionnaire, which was used among a variety of ethnic groups, inquired about the interviewees' origins, social and economic status, and cultural attitudes. Additional questions on newspaper reading and radio listening habits were designed in cooperation with the Princeton Radio Project. The special survey of the foreign language press interviewed producers of ethnic newspapers and radio programs, asking specific questions about their products' origins, leadership and general history.

The ethnic files series deals specifically with the sixteen ethnic groups studied in New Jersey, and contains the following types of research files: 1) summaries of survey questionnaire data, 2) case histories, and 3) newspaper clippings and other publications. The files also include finished chapters and drafts of chapters for those publications which were nearly complete when the project terminated in 1940. The final series, geographic files, contain information, arranged by municipality or county, on ethnic population, employment, health statistics, criminal offenses and cultural organizations.

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