

## Florida's New Deal Historic Resources

by *Sidney P. Johnston*

Seldom mentioned in studies of New Deal architecture or history, Florida is typically associated with beaches, citrus, sunshine, and tourism. Even students of Florida history too often give scant attention to the state's growth patterns and built fabric developed during the New Deal period. In the past several years, however, inquiries to Florida's State Historic Preservation Office from building owners and local governments about New Deal resources in their communities prompted a statewide study and the preparation of a National Register of Historic Places multiple property nomination that revealed some surprising results.

The multiple property format permits the State Historic Preservation Office to associate scattered resources that share a common link in history, prehistory, or architecture. The multiple property format also reduces the amount of time and paperwork required to prepare individual National Register nominations in the future. The multiple property format is flexible because additional property types and historic contexts may be added over time.<sup>1</sup>

The methodology used to prepare Florida's "New Deal Resources" multiple property nomination consisted of a literature search of past surveys and primary and secondary sources. The research yielded significant information about the extent and nature of the New Deal in Florida. Historical contexts and property types for evaluated properties were developed emphasizing important activities, individuals, and significant themes in the development of Florida during the Great Depression. Florida's New Deal resources were analyzed and evaluated for architectural themes and the agencies that contributed to Florida's built environment. Existing National Register nominations of New Deal resources suggested contextual frameworks and methodologies for organizing the multiple property document. Architectural styles were identified, and three general property types were developed: buildings, structures, and objects. A period of development between 1933 and 1943 was selected to reflect the traditional period of significance of the New Deal.

The multiple property format serves as a research tool with its extensive bibliography and a predictive model to help locate resources built throughout Florida with New Deal dollars. The document also assists Florida's State Historic Preservation Office with reviews under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, which requires that federal agencies identify and

assess the effects of their activities on historic resources. In addition, a National Register nomination for the St. Augustine Civic Center, a Federal Emergency Relief Agency project with Mission Revival influences, was prepared.

During the New Deal, the Federal Government established numerous “alphabet agencies” to construct buildings, conserve natural resources, establish recreation facilities, and improve infrastructure using grants, loans, and matching funds. Nearly two dozen agencies became known to millions of Americans by familiar initials, including the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Civil Works Administration (CWA), Federal Art Project (FAP), Federal Housing Administration (FHA), Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), National Recovery Administration (NRA), Public Works Administration (PWA), Resettlement Administration (RA), Rural Electrification Administration (REA), Works Progress Administration (WPA), and U.S. Housing Authority (USHA).

While criticized by some, the New Deal provided federal funding for thousands of improvement projects across the United States. In Florida, this included airports, armories, bridges, city halls, civic centers, courthouses, dams, fire stations, gymnasiums, hospitals, and public housing. The New Deal employed thousands of Floridians and provided local and state governments and federal agencies with new infrastructure, some of which displayed the latest in construction technology and reflected Art Deco, Streamline Moderne, and other architectural influences.

New Deal programs also yielded thousands of government documents and publications, many of which pertain to Florida. In 1939, the Public Works Administration published *Public Buildings: A Survey of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies between the Years 1933 and 1939 with Assistance of the Public Works Administration*.<sup>2</sup> The agency published the treatise, in part, to promote the PWA and help silence the New Deal’s critics. Replete with photographs of projects throughout the nation, the volume included black-and-white pictures and descriptions of approximately 15 buildings and structures that showcased the agency’s contributions in Florida, including the Apalachicola River Bridge near Blountstown (Figure 1); the Overseas Highway to Key West; Tallahassee’s National Guard Armory; and Miami’s Liberty Square, one of the nation’s first federal low-cost housing projects. (Figure 2)

Florida contains a surprisingly large number of New Deal resources, in part, because of the state’s staunch support of Roosevelt and his programs. Several notable Florida politicians supported the New Deal, including the indefatigable Claude “Red” Pepper and Senator Duncan U. Fletcher, and lesser known personalities, such as Ruth Bryan Owen and Bert Fish, whose contributions to the Roosevelt campaign were later rewarded with diplomatic posts. Florida’s

FIGURE 1

*Replacing a private ferry crossing one of Florida's significant rivers, the Apalachicola River Bridge was a Public Works Administration project completed at a cost of \$843,322 in September 1938. Built with a reinforced concrete deck, steel beams, and a distinctive bowstring arch truss, the bridge was one of the largest New Deal projects in Florida's rural panhandle counties. (From Public Buildings, 1939).*



FIGURE 2

*Occupied in February 1937, the Liberty Square Housing Development in Miami was the first federal housing project in Florida. Financed by the Public Works Administration and a precursor to the U.S. Housing Authority's residential projects, the development was designed by architect Phineas Paist and built at a cost of \$908,500. Part of a federal response to housing America's poorest citizens, Liberty Square was among the nation's earliest federal housing projects for African Americans. (From Public Buildings, 1939).*



rewards came in the construction of several large military installations, such as Naval Air Station Jacksonville and MacDill Air Force Base, numerous post offices with murals by artists working in the Federal Art Project, and massive funding for one of the nation's largest New Deal undertakings, the ill-fated Florida Ship Canal. An addition to the state capitol in Tallahassee, an expansion of the state hospital at Chattahoochee and construction of facilities at the Port of Miami were notable New Deal projects.

The Florida Park Service developed seven state parks during the New Deal, providing recreation opportunities for residents and out-of-state visitors. Following the tradition established by the National Park Service, the state park system employed rustic architecture in the construction of pedestrian bridges, palmetto-log overnight cabins, and limestone visitor centers. The Public Works Administration awarded the National Park Service a grant to build a visitor center at Fort Matanzas National Monument, another project with rustic architectural influences.

Research for the multiple property nomination project was conducted at various repositories, including the Florida Master Site File and the National Register Section at the Bureau of Historic Preservation, Florida State Archives, State Library of Florida, and the Florida State University Library. Holdings at the University of Florida also provided useful information, including the Government Documents Department, Map Library, and P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History. Newspapers contained vital information about the state's development during the Great Depression and the impact of the New Deal.

In addition, National Register nominations, including multiple property nominations from other states and individual resources previously listed in Florida, held important contextual information about the New Deal. Previous multiple property documents prepared in other states typically addressed only a few New Deal agencies or otherwise limited the scope of the investigation. Florida's "New Deal Resources" is one of few multiple property documents to address the full range of New Deal programs and resources associated with Federal Government spending statewide.

Research was also conducted on the Library of Congress and National Archives websites. Record groups at the National Archives that hold useful research materials include RG 31 (Records of the Federal Housing Administration), RG 35 (Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps), RG 69 (Records of the Works Projects Administration), RG 119 (Records of the National Youth Administration), and RG 135 (Records of the Public Works Administration). Files at the Florida State Archives containing important information include RG 192 (Florida State Planning Board), RG 150 (Florida Park Service Project Files), RG 590 (Florida Construction Program), and correspondence files of New Deal-era governors.

At the local level, school board and city and county commission minutes yield information about public buildings developed with New Deal resources. The Congressional Serials Set also contains valuable sources; an entire document is devoted to the Florida Ship Canal. Other contextual and site-specific information is available in government publications and reports issued by New Deal agencies. Filled with black-and-white pictures taken by photographers working in the Farm Security Administration and narratives composed by writers in the Federal Writers' Project, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, provides a graphic account of the Sunshine State near the close of the Great Depression. Articles in *American City*, *Engineering News-Record*, *Florida Historical Quarterly*, *Florida Municipal Record*, *Tampa Bay History*, and *Tequesta* furnish primary and secondary documentation about Florida in the Great Depression.

Compiled from these sources and the Florida Master Site File, approximately 450 resources previously inventoried in Florida have direct New Deal associa-

tions including public buildings, structures, and objects. Perhaps another 500 resources have yet to be documented. The review indicated that all of Florida's 67 counties enjoyed some level of New Deal development.

Project research also revealed some of Florida's Jim Crow segregationist culture. The U.S. Forest Service used CCC labor to develop Juniper Springs in the Ocala National Forest. There tensions between local whites and visiting African Americans from the North resulted in the Forest Service creating a "separate but equal" facility for blacks at Doe Lake Recreational Area elsewhere in the national forest. Other African American resources developed in Florida include Lake Wales's Roosevelt School, Tampa's Clara Frye Hospital, and low-cost public housing complexes in Jacksonville, Miami, and several other cities.

Florida's New Deal multiple property nomination establishes the framework for nominating additional properties to the National Register without preparing architectural and historic contexts for individual properties. In addition, the multiple property nomination serves as a predictive model, providing information about potential New Deal-era resources throughout Florida.

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### Notes

1. Information on multiple property nominations may be found in the *National Register Bulletin: How to Complete the National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form*, at [www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb16b/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb16b/); accessed on April 5, 2005.
2. C. W. Short and R. Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the Assistance of the Public Works Administration* (Washington, DC: Public Works Administration and U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Center for Cultural Resources



# CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship

Volume 2 Number 2 Summer 2005



*CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*  
Summer 2005  
ISSN 1068-4999

CRM = cultural resource management

*CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* is published twice each year by the National Park Service to address the history and development of and trends and emerging issues in cultural resource management in the United States and abroad. Its purpose is to broaden the intellectual foundation of the management of cultural resources. *CRM Journal* is edited in the offices of the National Center for Cultural Resources, National Park Service, in Washington, DC.

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*CRM Journal* is produced under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers.

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