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The Great Depression

An African-American Perspective

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Many books and reports have been written about The Great Depression yet there is very little known about African-American life during the depression. Our intent is to gather information on the historical, economic, and social impact of the Great Depression on the African-American community.

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Some background information

The Great Depression started with the Wall Street stock market crash of 1929 and began the worst economic crisis in the history of the United States. It had devastating effects on all sectors of the economy for over a decade. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs, businesses failed and financial institutions collapsed. Wages for workers who were lucky enough to have jobs fell drastically. The unemployed stood in long lines at soup kitchens waiting for something to eat and many went hungry. The duration of the depression was too long for any community to endure such hardship. Listed below are some of the topics we have briefly addressed and will be expanded as more information becomes available.

- **Government intervention** These are steps taken by the federal government to reduce unemployment and were also beneficial to African-Americans.
- **Coping with the depression** The primary concern here is look at what average African-Americans did to survive the depression.
- **The paradox** Finding opportunities open to African-Americans in education, science, engineering, and the arts seems to contradict the state of national economy and racial segregation during this period.

Government Intervention

Federal Government intervention came in the form of President Roosevelt's program called the "New Deal" that created several new federal agencies whose goal was to create jobs in order to alleviate the country's high unemployment. One of these agencies was the Works Progress Administration (WPA) created in 1935. The name of the agency was later changed to the Works Projects Administration. WPA created some worthwhile public projects and was successful in reducing unemployment. The WPA included a provisions for unemployed artists and writers.

The Writers' Project provided jobs for both beginning and experienced writers as long as they were unemployed and poor enough to qualify. Some of these WPA workers interviewed hundreds of African Americans born before the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery in 1865. Some of the people they interviewed were small children when the Civil War ended, but others were old enough to have experienced and remembered many aspects of slavery.

Since the Federal Writers were getting meager earnings from the government, they were viewed sympathetically by the people they interviewed. A common strategy practiced by the writers was to make the people they were interviewing feel important in order for them to open up. Interviews were conducted on the street, in nightclubs, and in people's homes. Participating in the Federal Writers Project was an invaluable experience, especially for those who continued to write books after the project was terminated shortly following America's entry into World War II.

Among those Federal Writers who went on to gain national literary reputations were novelists Nelson Algren, Saul Bellow and John Cheever, and poet May Swenson. Distinguished African-American writers served literary apprenticeships on the Federal Writers' Project, including Ralph Ellison, author and college instructor, Margaret Walker, Miss Zora Neale Hurston, novelist and anthropologist, and Richard Wright.

There was also the WPA, Federal Art Project. Among the participants was Charles White an African-American painter best known for portraying African-American leaders and common African-Americans in more realistic and favorable or positive fashion. He became interested in painting murals while working for the WPA Federal Art Project, another government program that put people to work during the Great Depression. He was convinced that murals could be a useful tool for educating people about African-American history. For instance he painted "Contribution of the Negro to American Democracy" (Hampton

University, Hampton, Virginia) in 1943. This is a mural that depicts African-Americans who played an important role in American history.

Another African-American painter was William Henry Johnson who is best known for his paintings of African Americans. A typical example of his paintings is "Going to Church" (National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.) which illustrates the subjects and style he chose and called "painting my people."

Relief also came from the building of the Grand Coulee Dam and the Hoover Dam. Although construction of these projects was proposed long before the depression, the actual construction took place during the depression and helped provide jobs to many Americans. However, there is no evidence of African-American participation in the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam, Hoover Dam and many of the major New Deal projects.

Then, America's involvement in World War II in 1941 sent a large number of young men into military service. Millions of jobs were created in defense industries and other support industries. World War II opened industrial opportunities to women, including African-American women, when workers were needed to replace white male workers drafted into military service. People who previously had limited job opportunities, now found themselves being hired in industry and other good paying jobs. The working African-Americans spent money in businesses located in their neighborhoods and other black owned enterprises. Organizations such as the NAACP continued to be active and attracted new members.

How did African-Americans survive The Great Depression?

It was extremely difficult for a large segment of the population to make a living during the depression. Living conditions were terrible and people lived in extreme poverty. While these conditions affected all segments of society, there is very little known about how African Americans survived during the depression. My goal is to find out, as much information as possible, what it was like to live during the Great Depression from an African Americans' point of view.

Much of the country's African-American population lived in rural areas and worked on farms owned by white landowners. For rural African-Americans, the Great Depression was hard to distinguish when poverty was always a way of life. Living conditions became more horrendous when some landowners lost their properties during the Depression. African-Americans had always relied on subsistence farming to supplement their meager earnings. In any case, most shared what little they had.

Life was considerably harder for African-Americans living in urban areas. However, there were many African-Americans who continued to work doing hard manual labor or working in areas inherently dangerous such as in foundries, while others worked as domestic servants for white folks. A smaller number worked for the railroads, steel mills, coal mines, school boards, etc. There were some enterprising African-Americans who made a fairly reasonable living operating small businesses.

Some African-Americans made a living as peddlers or street vendors. One gentleman by the name of Clyde "Kingfish" Smith is said to have made a living selling fish in Harlem, New York City for as little as five cents a pound.

Here is the paradox

Just when things were so dismal, segregation was the law of the land, and African-Americans were limited to menial and subservient jobs, there were areas where African-American life continued as usual. In some cases people lead a more productive life. It is in this setting that we find African-Americans enrolled and graduating from some of the nations prestigious universities and African-Americans making major contributions in science, engineering, and the arts. Some African-Americans who made some noteworthy contribution during the depression include the following:

- The Biologist and Zoologist, Dr. Hyman Yates Chase, earned his Bachelor of Science Degree from Howard University in 1926 and a Ph.D. from Stanford University in 1935.
- Dr. James Sumner Lee was appointed a Professor of Biology from Shaw University from 1930 to 1937. He was made Professor and Head of the Department of Bacteriology at North Carolina College, Durham, North Carolina in 1938.
- Dr. Herman Branson received a BS from Virginia State College in 1936 and a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Cincinnati in 1939. He was an Assistant Professor of Physics and Chemistry at Howard University from 1941 to 1943. Named Director of the ESMWT (Experimental Science and Mathematics W Technology) Program in Physics at Howard (1942-44).
- Archie Alexander, for example, continued to find work engineering bridges, power plants, and major structures across the nation during the depression.
- Dr. Marie Daly, Biochemist, received a Bachelor of Science from Queens College in 1942, Master of Science from New York University in 1943 and a Ph.D. in Chemistry from Columbia University in

1948.

U.S. Department of Energy Document DOE/OPA-0035(79) "Black Contributors to Science and Energy Technology" includes additional African-Americans who made major contributions in science. In addition, we also had artists and writers who continued to work and produce some great works during this difficult period. Among them are the following:

Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham was a choreographer, dancer, and scholar whose career began and flourished during and after the depression. She received her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in anthropology from the University of Chicago. She began performing in 1931 in Chicago and then worked for the New York Labor Stage in the late 1930s, where she staged dances for *The Emperor Jones*, *Pins and Needles*, and many others. She also choreographed for, and performed in, motion pictures and Broadway musicals.

Billie Holiday

Billie Holiday also known as Lady Day is one of the greatest jazz-blues singers of all time. She began singing in Harlem nightclubs and her recording session in 1935 brought her to public attention after which she became a vocalist for major orchestras including those of Count Basie and Artie Shaw. She made many recordings with the saxophonist Lester Young and with the pianist Teddy Wilson.

Duke Ellington

Duke Ellington, considered one of the greatest composers, bandleader and pianist in the history of jazz. His orchestra had no problem finding work during the great depression. His orchestra performed throughout the United States and other countries around the world.

Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong

Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong's achievements in jazz was legendary. He started as cornet player as a young man before becoming a great trumpeter and singer. He was one of those African-Americans who had no problem finding work and was successful during the depression. Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong recorded extensively and was in demand across the country, playing important engagements in Chicago, New York, Washington DC and Los. He made his first visits to Europe in 1932 .

Ella Fitzgerald

Ella Fitzgerald was one of America's great jazz singers. Fitzgerald's wide vocal range combined with judicious choice of repertoire contributed to her popularity with jazz and non-jazz audiences. She performed and recorded extensively and even recorded with Benny Goodman. The depression did not slow her down and neither did it impede her success.

Dizzy Gillespie

Dizzy Gillespie was another African-American jazz trumpeter who did well during and after the great depression. He played in the big bands of such figures as Cab Calloway and Earl "Fatha" Hines and collaborated, in 1945, with saxophonist Charlie Parker to produce some of the most greatest recordings of the era.

Please note that the African-Americans mentioned above make up a small, if not a negligible, number of African-Americans professionals and non-professionals who made a good living during the great depression. We need to know specific or individual stories of how others supported themselves and their families during the depression.

We need your feedback

If you are an African-American who experienced the hardships of The Great Depression or know someone who did, please share with us what life was like for African-American during the depression. This request is not limited to African-Americans who experienced terrible hardships during this period, we are also appealing to people of other races to give us their observations, and information they have on what kept African-Americans going during this period. We are also interested in African American participation in various public projects and programs including those mentioned above. Aware of segregation during this period, were there soup kitchens for African-Americans?

E-mail any information or suggestions you have to mtungsten@hotmail.com.

Other African-American History Sites:

African-American History African-American Pamphlets from the Daniel A. P. Murray Collection, offering insight into attitudes and ideas of African-Americans between Reconstruction and the First World War.

African-American Mosaic: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture.

Black History Hotlist Has good information for those studying African-American events and issues.

African-American Women Writers of the 19th Century: From Digital Schomburg of The

New York Public Library Digital Library Collections.

Black History: Highly recommended site for educators in African-American history and issues.

Black History Month: Recommended Web Sites from Hartford Public Library.

Black/African Related Resources



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