

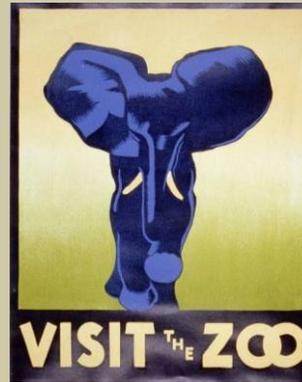
# Maryland New Deal Newsletter

Volume 1, Issue 2, September 2012

By Brent McKee & Colleen Walter



(WPA poster art)



(WPA poster art)

## *Quote of the Month:*

*“Is it dictatorship to try to operate a government for all the people and not just for a few? Is it dictatorship to guarantee the accounts of small depositors and keep phony stocks and bonds off the market? Is it dictatorship to save millions of homes from foreclosure? Is it dictatorship to give a measure of protection to millions who are economically insecure and jobs to other millions who can't find work?”*

--Harry Hopkins, first Administrator of the WPA, in response to former president Herbert Hoover's claim that the New Deal was leading America towards fascism.

(Quote found in the Washington Post, May 9, 1938)

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# “A Tale of Two Historic Post Offices: One Saved, One Lost?”

By Brent McKee



(Upper Marlboro Library-formerly a post office. Photo by Brent McKee)



(Former Bethesda Post Office. Photo by Brent McKee)

The former Upper Marlboro Post Office and the former Bethesda Post Office share a few things in common: Both were built in the 1930s as U.S. Treasury Department projects; both have historic artwork inside them (the famous New Deal era post office murals); both have interesting architecture, e.g., stone/brick work & cupolas; both served their Maryland communities for decades; and both were vacated by the U.S. Postal Service in recent times.

But there is one key difference between the two historic post offices: The Upper Marlboro Post Office was converted into a public library, and the Bethesda Post Office was sold to a private real estate firm.

When the Upper Marlboro Post Office was converted into a public library (part of the Prince George’s County Memorial Library System), the mural was restored, and “Many of the original architectural features were preserved in the award-winning renovation and are enhanced by contemporary details that complement the old” (from a flyer inside the library, see source list below). The historic mural is, of course, viewable during the library’s open hours.

What about the Bethesda Post Office? Now that it is in private hands, what will happen to the building and the artwork? Will they be maintained, preserved, and accessible? No one seems to have a firm grasp on the details of

the sale of the building, let alone the future of its preservation. Maryland Congressman Chris Van Hollen was so exasperated by the murky arrangements of the sale that he stated: "In these particular circumstances, clearly what we see is gross mismanagement that is costing the taxpayer...I certainly hope there are not more disturbing details, because what we know is disturbing enough" (See Gazette article in the source list below).

Across the nation, controversies are erupting over the sale of historic post office buildings to private entities. Many people are trying to stop these sales, and keep our shared history in our shared hands. For example, Dr. Gray Brechin, of the University of California, Berkeley, is helping to lead an effort to save the century-old Berkeley Post Office from being sold to a private firm (See Berkeley Daily Planet article in the source list below).

The U.S. Postal Service is an American institution that has always been, to some degree or another, public. The Post Office is in our Constitution, and it's an important link to our Founding Fathers (particularly Benjamin Franklin) and to our early nationhood. It is also an important part of the nation's—and the world's—communications history. Before there were tweets, emails, telephones, and telegraphs, there was mail. And there still is plenty of mail. Additionally, many of the post offices across the country have their own unique stories to tell, like the Upper Marlboro and Bethesda post offices, which were part of that group of post offices built during the 1930s. These post offices are symbols of a bygone era, when adorning public buildings with art was viewed positively and when construction & activity were seen as positive responses to Depression.

Change is inevitable, and we can't save everything. But, wherever possible, I would suggest that the Upper Marlboro Post Office-to-Library conversion described above is far preferable to relinquishing our history to profit-seeking entities. From my research on the Works Progress Administration, I can tell you that much of Maryland's rich aviation history has been destroyed in the name of "progress" or "necessity." Interesting structures, with fascinating stories to tell from the Great Depression and World War II, are gone forever. Let's try to stop this from happening to our historic post offices.

### Sources:

(1) Maryland Inventory of Historic Places reports (for both post offices) on file at the Maryland Historical Trust. (2) "The Tobacco Cutters" flyer in the Upper Marlboro Library. (3) Jessica Ablamsky, "U.S. Postal Service spending more than \$186,000 for an empty building," *The Gazette*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.gazette.net/article/20120731/NEWS/707319937/us-postal-service-spending-more-than-186000-for-an-empty-building&template=gazette>, accessed September 1, 2012. (4) Steven Finacom, "Berkeley Post Office rally highlights opposition to sale," *Berkeley Daily Planet*, July 24, 2012, <http://www.berkeleydailyplanet.com/issue/2012-07-20/article/40034?headline=Berkeley-Post-Office-Rally-Highlights-Opposition-to-Sale--By-Steven-Finacom>, accessed September 1, 2012.

## Personalities from the 1930s: Huey Long, the "Kingfish" (1893-1935)

By Bill Barry

*(Editor's Note: When possible, we will be including articles in our newsletter about the broader national scene during the 1930s. This will add a richer context to our newsletter by highlighting the "atmosphere" that Maryland existed in during the New Deal era. )*



(Huey Long, the Kingfish. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress and Wikipedia)

"So, we have in America today, my friends, a condition by which about 10 men dominate the means of activity in at least 85 percent of the activities that you own. They either own directly everything or they have got some kind of mortgage on it, with a very small percentage to be excepted. They own the banks, they own the steel mills, they own the railroads, they own the bonds, they own the mortgages, they own the stores, and they have chained the country from one end to the other until there is not any kind of business that a small, independent man could go into today and make a living . . . people today are seeing their own children hungry, tired, half-naked, lifting their tear-dimmed eyes into the sad faces of their fathers and mothers, who cannot give them food and clothing they both need, and which is necessary to sustain them, and that

goes on day after day, and night after night, when day gets into darkness and blackness, knowing those children would arise in the morning without being fed, and probably go to bed at night without being fed."

This speech may sound like the Occupy Wall Street movement of today, but it is part a radio speech given on February 25, 1934 by one of the most influential figures of the 1930s, Huey P. Long, the Senator from Louisiana. Always called "Huey," or "The Kingfish," he introduced his Share Our Wealth (SOW) movement to an audience of millions and framed a political debate that is clearly important to the "history lives" comparisons between the 1930s and today.

Huey's slogan 'Every Man A King—No Man Wears a Crown' challenged the New Deal policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt as too accommodating to Wall Street and were part of Huey's campaign to defeat FDR in the 1936 elections. While many of FDR's opponents attacked him as a "socialist," Long caustically referred to the President as "the Knight of the Nourmahal," a reference to the "magnificent stream yacht" of John Jacob Astor, with whom FDR enjoyed sailing.

Born in Winn Parish in northern Louisiana in 1893, Huey grew up in an area that—unlike the rest of the state--supported Populism and voted socialist. As his political career grew, Huey challenged the old white planter power structure that had survived since Reconstruction but also the monopolies, like Standard Oil and turpentine manufacturers, which exploited Louisiana's abundant natural resources with no benefit to the citizens. One of the many criticisms directed at Huey was his relentless political machine but Huey claimed that he simply needed a more powerful machine to accomplish his political goals. "I used to get things done by saying please," said Huey. "Now I dynamite them out of my path."

A rare figure in US politics, Huey was elected governor of Louisiana in 1928, and Senator in 1930, holding both positions until 1932. At the state level, there were increased expenditures for public education and appropriations to Louisiana State University, while bridges were built across the Mississippi and other large Louisiana rivers. Free textbooks, charity hospitals, old-age pensions, free night schools for adults, sales taxes and higher gasoline, corporate, franchise, and severance taxes were approved by the legislature.

On a national level, Huey supported FDR in 1932 but soon began to attack the president for being too cautious and proposed the SOW program. By 1935, Huey's *Share Our Wealth Society* had over 7.5 million members in 27,000 clubs across the country. His Senate office was flooded with thousands of letters daily, prompting him to hire 32 typists, who worked around the clock to respond to the fan mail. The flamboyant Huey was the nation's third most photographed man (after FDR and celebrity aviator Charles Lindberg) and one national poll found Huey to be the most attractive man in America—ahead of Tarzan. FDR considered Huey, along with General Douglas MacArthur, to be "the two most dangerous men in the United States" and tried a series of attacks and IRS investigations to block Huey's political power.

In late 1935, Huey made it known—partly by the publication of his book, *My First Days in the White House*—that he intended to run for President but on September 8, 1935, he was assassinated in the Louisiana state capitol building. His last words were reportedly "God, don't let me die. I have so much to do."

An estimated 200,000 people came to Baton Rouge for the viewing—more than 8 times the usual population of the city--and his archive is filled with letters from grief-stricken residents who felt they had lost both a friend and a savior. In looking at the 1930s, in comparison to today, the issues of social inequality and the division of wealth—so forcefully raised by *The Kingfish*—are once again prominent issues.

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For more history about Huey Long, there is a terrific site <http://www.hueylong.com/> which includes an enormous amount of original source material, including a very emotional section of personal reminiscences about Long. A long and sympathetic biography by T. Harry Williams, called *Huey Long* (1969), includes extensive new oral histories while Robert Penn Warren's novel, *All The Kings Men* (1946) and a series of movies based on the novel, while more critical, are certainly worth your time.

Bill Barry is the retired Director of Labor Studies at The Community College of Baltimore County and developed a course, *The History of the 1930s*, <http://faculty.ccbcmd.edu/~wbarry/History%20of%201930s.html>.

## Our New Deal Benefit Today!



(Fairlead Academy. Photo by Brent McKee)

Fairlead Academy in Lexington Park (St. Mary's County) helps high school students "graduate with confidence and motivation to achieve college and career success" (<http://schools.smcps.org/fairlead/>). The school was built by the WPA, 1936-37, and originally called "Great Mills School." Before its current use, the building was utilized in various ways, e.g., as an elementary school and as a location for community college classes. Fairlead Academy is a good example of how public investment, and the utilization of the skills & labor of the unemployed, can reap decades of benefits.

## New Deal Art



*(Photos by Brent McKee. Two sections of the same mural.)*

The above mural—commissioned by the U.S. Treasury—is in the former Bethesda Post Office at 7400 Wisconsin Avenue (Montgomery County), and was painted by Robert F. Gates circa 1939. It shows a woman working on a farm, and a group of women at a farmer's market.

## Neat Links

**The Living New Deal:** A project that is creating a national database, and a national map, of still-existing New Deal sites & structures:

<http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/>

**College course at the Community College of Baltimore County:** "History of the 1930s":

<http://faculty.ccbcmd.edu/~wbarry/History%20of%201930s.html>

(A section of this course is being planned for Spring Semester 2013)

## Bios

**Brent McKee** is a board member of the National New Deal Preservation Association, a Research Associate for the Living New Deal mapping project, and creator of "WPA Today," a web project designed to help preserve the history of the Works Progress Administration, particularly in Maryland ([www.wpatoday.org](http://www.wpatoday.org)). He holds a Master of Public Policy degree from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He can be reached at [wpatoday@gmail.com](mailto:wpatoday@gmail.com).

**Colleen Walter** is active in the history field through a variety of organizations. She works as both staff archivist and gallery assistant at the Benjamin Banneker Historical Park and Museum. She also does on site living history interpretation at the National Colonial Farm, Accokeek Foundation. Her interest in the New Deal and the work of the CCC in particular came from her work with the MD Department of Natural Resources Committee for Maryland Conservation History. She continues to serve them as an active member and secretary of the Foundation, which recently earned non-profit 501C-3 status. Her master's thesis for the University of Maryland, Baltimore County focused on the three pronged impact of the Corps upon the nation- at environmental, economic, and social levels for both the enrollees and local populations.

## Can You Help?

Through our newsletter (and other activities) we're trying to raise awareness and interest in Maryland's New Deal history. We are also hoping to start a non-profit organization to preserve, present, and promote this history (possibly including the entire Mid-Atlantic area). If you can help in any way, e.g., information leads, article submissions, technical suggestions, we would appreciate it!