

EARLY NEW DEAL RELIEF EFFORTS IN ROCKBRIDGE
COUNTY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE FERA IN A
LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

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Howard W. Herndon

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Preface

Historians such as George Wolfskill and Arthur Schlesinger have carried out voluminous research concerning Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempts to "wrestle America from the clutches of depression." As a result, students of America's Great Depression have become acquainted with the New Deal and its member agencies at the national level. Unfortunately, historians have written very little pertaining to the activities of the New Deal on the local scene, the only level at which hundreds of thousands of Americans came into contact with the New Deal during the 1930s. Michael S. Holmes, in his survey of the New Deal in Georgia, contends that previous historians have avoided this area of research for several reasons. For one, he cites the historian's fear "of being labeled a student of parochial concerns." More important he points to the complex activities of the agencies at the state and local level, and as a result historians tend to view such a study as involving the trees and missing the forest altogether.

Holmes submits, however, that until historians have studied the local activities of these agencies, a thorough understanding of the New Deal is impossible. In accordance with Holmes' suggestion, my study concerns the affairs of the New Deal in Virginia, concentrating on one county in particular: the county of Rockbridge.

I have limited my work to a consideration of one relief

agency of the New Deal: The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). I will attempt to follow the history of the FERA during its activity in Rockbridge County in an effort to determine the functions of the local agency. I will review the conditions which prominently influenced the adequacy with which the FERA met the needs of Rockbridge County's unemployed. Although the New Deal's recovery and reform agencies played a significant part in Roosevelt's strategy to renew economic stability, it is my contention that the New Deal's relief efforts warrant special attention. The continuation of relief efforts throughout the depression reflects, sadly enough, the inability of the recovery and reform activities of the New Deal to cope with the economic hard times. Obviously, the longer recovery took, the more drawn out the relief efforts became.

In evaluating the success and adequacy of the FERA in Rockbridge County, I will, as Holmes suggests, investigate the "quality of state and local administrators, the structure of state administrations, and more importantly the political, economic and social considerations with which the state and local officials had to contend."

The challenge that this paper presented was indeed great. The New Deal was an experiment, and as such, men recorded the activities of their governments more thoroughly than any other period before the 1930s. Unfortunately the available resource materials do not provide answers to several questions concerning the local operation of the FERA. For example, information regarding work relief is both scarce and, in fact, contradictory.

I was, however, very fortunate to gain access to two boxes of records concerning Rockbridge County's FERA program which I uncovered in the basement of the local courthouse. The task that this study created, however, was not so much one of finding materials, but of dealing with the bulky and unorganized resources that were at hand--a chore that previous historians have avoided with great success!

While some historians may consider this project a "micro-history," I believe that it has substantial value. Not only does it afford a unique insight into the operation of a national agency at the local level, but also it sheds light on the apprehension about public welfare institutions that Virginians have expressed since the early seventeenth century and are still expressing today.

CHAPTER I

DEPRESSION AND EARLY RELIEF EFFORTS

In 1929 the President's Conference on Unemployment published a report entitled Recent Economic Changes. A review of this study leaves the impression that many of America's leaders during the late '20s immersed themselves in a "complete infatuation with prosperity and the promise of its continuance."¹ Economists of the period such as Professor Edwin F. Gay pointed to growth as the key to the stability of the nation's economy, and saw no limit to America's economic potential. The Crash of 1929, which ushered in one of the bleakest periods in recent American history, shattered this confidence in the future. The failing stock market was not the fundamental cause of the Great Depression, but only an indication of the economic confusion which the United States faced throughout the 1930s.²

Economic collapse came as a complete shock to most Americans. For several months after the crash, government officials refused to acknowledge the gravity of the recent events. Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon stated, "I see nothing . . . in the present situation that is either menacing or warrants pessimism . . ." ³ But economic recovery was not "around the corner," and the nation's businesses were not as secure as officials were leading the public to believe. The employment index (1923-1925 = 100) for durable goods and construction industries fell by almost

fifty points in less than two years. Even the traditionally stable nondurable goods industries such as clothing manufacturing showed signs of economic stress, with their employment indexes falling approximately twenty points between 1929 and 1932.⁴ Nondurable manufacturing concerns in the South remained relatively healthy, however, and never dropped lower than 73% of pre-depression levels.⁵

As the Great Depression affected certain industries while leaving others comparatively untouched, it likewise struck some states more harshly than others. Virginia is a case in point. Unlike other Southern states, Virginia's economic position was reasonably strong at the onset of the depression. Even though much of Virginia was impoverished her residents could boast greater per capita wealth than their Southern brethren; 51% owned their homes, compared to a national average of 47%.⁶ Although her retail trade in 1931 declined by 4.7%, her trade was thriving in relation to neighboring states such as North Carolina, whose trade slipped by 10.3%.⁷ Virginius Dabney, Ronald Heinemann and other historians point to Virginia's relative stability during this period as a result of the balance in her economy between manufacturing and agricultural interests. Yet, not all elements of her economy were strong.

Virginia's farmers felt the early effects of the depression more sharply than any other segment of her population. While general incomes in the South declined by 42% from their 1929 position, those receiving their earnings from agriculture suffered a 61% loss.⁸ Although Virginia's overall economic outlook was

better than most, her agricultural sector was not healthy. The droughts of 1930 and 1932 were in large part responsible for the economic hardship that most area farmers faced.⁹

During the summer of 1930, the drought in the Great Valley of Virginia made headlines in local newspapers for several months. Many areas experienced temperatures as high as 103° and went without rain for forty-two consecutive days. One unofficial report estimated that the drought destroyed 80% of all agricultural production for that year. Just to the north of Rockbridge County, the drought forced cattlemen to sell their livestock at four cents a pound, a loss of twenty to thirty dollars a steer.¹⁰ The summer of 1932 brought another drought that in some respects was even more devastating than the preceding one. Farm incomes decreased approximately 20 to 25% of normal levels, and wheat prices were lower than they had been in 132 years.¹¹ Yet Virginia's agricultural diversity afforded her farmers limited price stability and lessened to some extent the harshness of the Great Depression.¹²

Although the depression in Virginia was relatively less severe, a great deal of suffering did occur in the Old Dominion. Virginia was by no means a paradise within a land of hunger and hardship. In 1930, a census report stated that 35,359 employable workers were without jobs.¹³ Associated with the growth in unemployment was a 16% increase in the number of farms in Virginia between 1930 and 1935. This increase resulted when the unemployed from urban areas returned to the countryside in order to eke out a subsistence standard of living. By 1932 when unemployment reached 19%, Virginians had experienced the worst of the depression; this

was a relatively small figure compared to the national average of 30%.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the '30s was a period when individuals needed the help of their neighbors, community, and federal government as they never had before.

During the early part of the depression, many people expected private charity to keep pace with relief demands. This expectation, according to Broadus Mitchell, resulted in what he called "a bankruptcy of private philanthropy." Before 1930, private relief agencies had been able to cope with moderate levels of unemployment, but the Great Depression caused more individuals to be without work than private relief efforts could accommodate. As Mitchell stated, "The most naive notion was that private charity, especially if assisted by local public funds, would suffice."¹⁵

Private relief in Rockbridge County came from many sources. Relief efforts ranged from the Blue Ridge Garden Club which provided funds to assist subsistence garden plots, to the local Kiwanis Club which supplied milk for needy children, to Washington and Lee University students who donated books of meal tickets for the care of transients.¹⁶ Yet, as in other communities, Lexington's charities felt the effects of economic collapse. During October of 1933, the town sponsored a Community Drive to raise funds for relief activities and the Children's Clinic. The organizers of the campaign asked the Lexington Gazette to support the cause. The paper responded by running an editorial which pleaded with the community to contribute. It remarked that the citizen's support of the campaign would continue to make " . . . this community the humane, the sympathetic, the samaritan place it

has always had the reputation of being."¹⁷ But the drive raised only \$762.69, falling miserably short of its \$4000 goal.¹⁸ Fortunately the Community Drive was not the only private relief effort upon which those in need of assistance could rely.

During the early '30s, the Red Cross in Rockbridge County carried a major portion of the private relief load. In the summer of 1932, it established a Volunteer Corps in an effort to cope with the unprecedented unemployment. Its members formed neighborhood centers which they used to sew clothing for the poor. The federal government allocated cotton and other materials to the local organization to support the program. The relief center in Lexington supplied the city's poor with 6,000 "ready made garments" and sewed clothing for 2,104 persons in the County.¹⁹ In total, during 1933, the Red Cross gave to Rockbridge County \$10,000 worth of supplies for the needy.²⁰ Yet, even this private assistance, which came from both national and local contributions, was not adequate to meet the area's relief demands.

Because private relief was insufficient, the poor and unemployed had to depend on assistance from public relief organizations to augment these private efforts. The advent of public relief, however, was not an outgrowth of the Great Depression. This form of relief in Virginia dated from 1785, when the Revolution shifted the responsibility of caring for the poor from the local church vestries to groups in each county, the Overseers of the Poor. Although the activities of these groups varied from one county to another, the poor relief legislation of 1785 required that the Overseers of the Poor appoint a superintendent

whose duties were "limited to management of workhouses, poorhouses, (and) almshouses."²¹ Evidence suggests, though, that by the late 1920s, the Overseers of the Poor were playing a diminished role in local poor relief. It was during this time that Rockbridge County sold its poor farm. Moreover, in 1933 the Gazette described the Overseers as an advisory group to the fledgling FERA. As Frank Hoffer, Associate Research Professor of Public Welfare at the University of Virginia, reported in 1929, "The outdoor relief practices of 300 years are being cast off. The Overseers of the Poor are giving way to Superintendents of Public Welfare."²²

While the Overseers of the Poor administrated public relief in the County, another group, the Welfare Board, was responsible for relief in the town of Lexington. The Board's membership varied from six to eight members drawn from the Lexington Welfare Association. Its job was to supervise the distribution of supplies and setting up work for the needy. All members of the Board were volunteers except Mrs. Elizabeth Barclay, who received \$100 a month as a welfare worker. Between April 1, 1932, and June 1, 1933, the Board issued 2,500 food orders, which individuals used at local grocery stores. This represented assistance to 176 families and \$7,606.06 in total relief. The city provided this aid in return for work on its streets--recipients received half of their wages in cash and half in grocery orders. The unemployed also received wood and coal; a man received a quarter cord of wood for every cord he cut for the city.²³ The day-to-day work of the Board came to a close on November 29, 1933. It did, nevertheless, remain in existence as an advisory body. The suspension of its

activities resulted from concern that its efforts might overlap with the relief work of the new Emergency Relief Administration.²⁴

In addition to these local public relief operations, the state made limited assistance available to needy individuals. For example, in 1930, when rainfall declined by 60% of its normal level, residents from rural areas pleaded for help.²⁵ President Herbert Hoover took steps to alleviate the crisis in the drought stricken South by offering federal loans to twelve states including Virginia. In the Old Dominion the Byrd Drought Relief Committee supervised the distribution of these loans. These funds allowed Harry Flood Byrd, "the undisputed leader of the Virginia Democratic organization," the opportunity to continue his "pay-as-you-go" road building program.²⁶ The Senator attempted to secure \$5 million in relief loans to put to work thousands of Virginia's unemployed in the construction of "farm to market roads." The committee never received state funds for this work; Harry Byrd, throughout his career, fought deficit spending. He envisioned these federal monies first as funding for highways and second as alleviating unemployment. The committee remained active until July, 1931, when the state's agricultural sector became somewhat stronger. Byrd's placing of selfish business interests above the needs of the unemployed is just one example of the manner in which Byrd and his political machine treated social issues throughout the 1930s.²⁷

Although Byrd's committee ceased to exist after 1931, Governor John Garland Pollard continued to use Byrd's approach to funding relief efforts through the state's highway programs.

Pollard asked for an additional \$1 million, and stated, "giving work rather than dispersing charity was the necessity."²⁸

By 1931, word of nationwide unemployment had Virginians worried. In the fall of that year, labor leaders in the Old Dominion began demanding that the state take substantive steps to alleviate the situation. The Governor responded to this request on September 10, 1931 by appointing the Virginia Unemployment Committee. The committee's first task was to register all of the state's unemployed so that officials might determine the extent of the problem. This was no easy task, because at the time only three unemployment offices existed in the state, and the Committee had to rely on mayors and county commissioners to carry out the registration. The committee's specious survey revealed that 6.1% of the labor force was without work. After reviewing the report, the committee did, however, develop a plan of attack against unemployment, based primarily upon appeals to employers.²⁹ Because the committee was without legislative authority, it simply asked that private business adopt "five-day work weeks and institute new building projects."³⁰

The voluntary compliance of private business with the unemployment committee's program was not effective. The state continued to use its highway program as its major means of putting the unemployed to work. Between December of 1931 and the spring of 1932, the state employed 20,000 persons on road projects, and when the drought of 1932 hit the state, Governor Pollard was able to increase road funds by acquiring from the federal government \$12,394,756 out of Virginia's future road allocation.³¹

Because Harry Byrd and his political machine were unwilling to place an additional burden on the state's balanced budget, Virginia relied entirely on federal loans to support her relief efforts. But the localities, faced with the tremendous relief problem, encountered economic hardship. The counties began to demand tax relief, and in January of 1932 the General Assembly responded by taking over the maintenance of secondary and feeder roads.³² At no time during this period did local governments ask for state assistance with their relief concerns. Many Virginians still considered relief a local responsibility.

The worst of the depression came in 1932, and Governor Pollard reacted to the failing economy by initiating a program of retrenchment. The Governor cut his own salary, emphasizing that reduction of expenditures would bring the state back to a sound economic position.³³ Pollard's retrenchment efforts affected almost all state employees, but it especially hurt the state's teachers. In three years the average teacher's salary declined by half, falling in 1934 to \$532. With Pollard's retrenchment efforts came, for the first time, opposition to what critics have called the "Organization"--another name for Byrd's political machine which supported highway construction over state assistance to schools, health activities and, finally, relief. Retrenchment, according to historian Ronald Heinemann, forced "liberal voices" to speak out against the Organization's constrictive fiscal policies.³⁴

In 1932, President Hoover stated, "It's not the function of the government to relieve individuals of their responsibilities to their fellow neighbors."³⁵ Although this statement expressed a

traditional attitude towards poor relief, the continuing depression forced the federal government to enter this realm of local responsibility. Hoover adamantly opposed federal sponsorship of public works.³⁶ Yet, the President did not block passage on July 21, 1932 of the Emergency Relief and Construction Act. The depression had deepened, and the President had finally realized that the federal government would have to take action. This legislation established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), and appropriated \$3 million of relief funds that states could borrow from the federal government.³⁷ The RFC was responsible for overseeing the distribution and control of these funds. Three sections of the 1932 Bill are significant. Title I provided relief funds "as advances against future federal road allotments." Title II made provisions for "self-liquidating projects." Under Title III, the Government could establish a federal-state public works program.³⁸

In Virginia the State Emergency Relief Committee administered the programs and funds of the RFC. Between September, 1932, and May, 1933, the state was able to procure \$3,485,711.11 for relief projects through the efforts of this committee. The Virginia Emergency Relief Committee (VERC) distributed financial relief to the unemployed through local relief committees, which it established in each county and placed under the authority of the Boards of Supervisors. To insure some degree of uniformity in these activities, the state sent regional representatives to the localities when these communities requested administrative assistance. On April 1, 1933 with the onset of spring, the state discontinued

the county relief work because officials thought that people would return to work on area farms.³⁹

Arthur James, Commissioner of Public Welfare for the state, suggested in his evaluation of this organization's activities:

If the test is whether the people in need of assistance were given relief in quick and effective manner, the answer is that they were and that there was little difference in the previously organized and unorganized counties and cities.⁴⁰

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency brought a sharply contrasting approach to relief in the United States. Unlike Hoover's belief that by pouring millions of dollars into corporations, money would percolate down to the unemployed, Roosevelt's strategy was to meet the private needs of individuals directly, which would in turn prevent the collapse of corporations.⁴¹ With the establishment of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in May of 1933, a move which reflected Roosevelt's attitude toward poor relief, the Virginia Emergency Relief Committee asked the Governor to end its operations, and to form a new group to continue its activities under the FERA. In a letter to Pollard on October 16, 1933, the Committee referred to the new FERA operation as an "out-and-out professional social work organization," and suggested that since the VERC had aligned itself with the state's road building agencies in the past, the committee should expand its membership.⁴² The committee had drawn criticism because its membership represented only a few state agencies, such as the Highway Department. Acting on the committee's suggestion, the Governor appointed a new and enlarged VERC. Pollard selected Dr. Francis Pendleton Gaines, President of Washington and Lee

University, as chairman. Joining Gaines was William A. Smith as Executive Director of the new VERC. Before his selection, the city of Petersburg had employed Smith as an assistant City Engineer. Smith eventually went on to head the State Emergency Relief Administration, Civil Works Administration and Works Progress Administration programs in Virginia.⁴³

In summary, the relief efforts in Virginia before the onset of the New Deal were a mixture of private and public endeavors, none of which was particularly successful. Because private relief was insufficient, federal involvement in relief activities became necessary. Under heavy pressure from the Byrd machine the state government was unwilling to get involved in a substantive relief program of its own. As long as public assistance programs were not particularly beneficial to many of the state's business concerns, Byrd and his followers would not lend their support. It is this political setting that any further study of relief in Virginia must take into account.

Footnotes

¹Broadus Mitchell, The Economic History of the United States, vol. 9: Depression Decade (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947), p. 26.

²Ibid., p. 28.

³Ibid., p. 31.

⁴Ibid., p. 97.

⁵Wendell Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter, gen. ed., A History of the South, 10 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press and the Littlefield Fund for Southern History of the University of Texas, 1967), vol. 10: The Emergence of the New South: 1913-1945, by George B. Tindall, p. 360.

⁶Virginius Dabney, Virginia: The New Dominion (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 488.

⁷Ronald Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal in Virginia" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968), p. 89.

⁸Tindall, The Emergence, p. 354.

⁹Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 23.

¹⁰Karen Hayden, "The Drought Years," Shenandoah Magazine, January 1981, pp. 34-35.

¹¹Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 39.

¹²Ibid., p. 24.

¹³Arthur James, The State Becomes a Social Worker (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1942), p. 240.

¹⁴Dabney, Virginia, p. 489.

¹⁵Mitchell, Depression Decade, p. 107.

¹⁶Lexington Gazette, June 28, 1933, 1-4.

¹⁷Ibid, October 11, 1933, 1.

¹⁸Ibid., October 4, 1933, 2.

¹⁹Ibid., July 12, 1933, 1.

²⁰Ibid., November 15, 1933, 7.

²¹Frank Hoffer, Counties in Transition (Charlottesville: The Institute for Research in the Social Sciences, University of

Virginia, 1929), pp. 74-75.

²²Ibid., p. 69.

²³Lexington Gazette, June 28, 1933, pp. 1-4.

²⁴Allen W. Moger, Virginia: Bourganism to Byrd (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1968), p. 333.

²⁵Lexington Gazette, December 6, 1933, 1.

²⁶Dabney, Virginia, p. 488.

²⁷James, The State Becomes, pp. 240-242.

²⁸Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 21.

²⁹James, The State Becomes, p. 243.

³⁰Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 42.

³¹James, The State Becomes, p. 247.

³²Ibid., p. 245.

³³Dabney, Virginia, p. 489.

³⁴Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 42.

³⁵Mitchell, Depression Decade, p. 87.

³⁶George Wolfskill, Happy Days are Here Again (Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1974), p. 15.

³⁷Tindall, Emergence, p. 374.

³⁸James, The State Becomes, p. 249.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 251-255.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 257.

⁴¹Mitchell, Depression Decade, p. 89.

⁴²James, The State Becomes, p. 262.

⁴³Ibid., p. 263.

CHAPTER II

"DO ANYTHING AS LONG AS YOU DO SOMETHING:"

THE FEDERAL EMERGENCY RELIEF ACT

OF MAY 1933

Passage of the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933 represented the culmination of a three year debate about the government's role in aiding the unemployed. More importantly, this act, which established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, marked a striking change in the government's attitude toward relief. For the first time, American politicians perceived unemployment as a national, rather than simply a local problem. Likewise, politicians saw for the first time the federal government as the only body with the means of meeting both the administrative and financial demands that unemployment presented. The major difference between this and previous federal relief programs was the government's use of "grants in aid" to individual states rather than providing them loans.¹ With the enactment of the FERA, Congress appropriated \$500 million to the states in outright grants. The government immediately distributed half of this grant according to a matching formula. The states received one dollar for every three dollars that they had spent on relief during the first quarter of 1933. The administration distributed the other \$250 million according to need, without regard to the state's relief appropriations.²

Congress established the FERA to meet several objectives. It instructed the administration to provide food, clothing and housing for the unemployed. From the inception of the FERA, the federal government clearly intended to assist only individuals whom the Great Depression had left without work. Throughout its existence, officials tried to distinguish between "unemployed employables" and those who normally would not have had jobs, regardless of the state of the economy.³ Second, it instructed the FERA to use work relief rather than direct relief, or the dole, whenever possible. A final objective was to secure work for the unemployed appropriate to the individual's skills.⁴

The FERA never intended to eliminate the local government's immediate responsibility for carrying out day-to-day relief. The FERA's administrative function was, after all, to assist state operations. As the Federal Emergency Relief Act stated, Congress established the organization to ". . . assure adequate administrative supervision and suitable standards of relief."⁵

Because the basic function of the FERA was to assist the states to meet the economic crisis, and because the agency could not dictate its programs to them, the degree to which the states followed federal guidelines and advice varied greatly. Not only did states, such as Oklahoma, North Dakota, Massachusetts, Ohio, Louisiana and Georgia, refuse to participate in these federal programs, but they also attempted to block any federal relief activities in their own domains. When this occurred the FERA federalized the relief operations inside these states, an action that the agency came close to taking in the state of Virginia.⁶

President Roosevelt chose Harry Hopkins, who had administered his relief programs in New York, to head the new organization. Hopkins was a social worker by profession, who intensely disliked the dole. He was a very capable and effective administrator, and was in large part responsible for the success the FERA achieved. His greatest tasks were to persuade each state to appropriate its share to relief efforts and to keep politics out of the state's relief affairs. Hopkin's regional advisors helped him to carry out these tasks by evaluating the state's ability to contribute and the effectiveness of their organizations.⁷

Alan Jonestone acted as the FERA's advisor for the Southeast region, which included Virginia. He reported directly to Hopkins about the needs of the Southern states and their ability to support relief activities. His advice, along with the requests from the governors of the states, allowed the Finance Division of the FERA to determine the amount of aid the administrator would grant. Between 1933 and 1935 the FERA contributed \$26 million to Virginia, which amounted to 90% of the state's relief expenditures.⁸ Because of the "Organization's" ultraconservative fiscal policy, the state refused to provide funding for this program. Still, the FERA never entirely shut off funds to Virginia. During the FERA's existence the governors of the Old Dominion submitted seventy-two requests for financial assistance, and each time the federal government granted these appeals.⁹ Even though the state failed to meet the FERA's requirement of providing matching funds, it did meet the other request of establishing an agency to run relief operations in Virginia.

On June 14, 1933, Governor Pollard and several members of the VERC attended a briefing in Washington, D.C., which provided information concerning the formulation of the state administrative organizations. In order for Virginia to receive its share, approximately \$1.6 million, of the initial \$250 million appropriation, the state had to form an organization which met federal guidelines.¹⁰ Within several days of this meeting, Governor Pollard announced the establishment of the Virginia Emergency Relief Administration (VERA). To head the new organization, Pollard appointed William A. Smith, who had been serving as Executive Director of the VERC. Although Smith was unable to persuade the Byrd machine to move from its conservative stance on relief, he was honest, and most state officials held him in high regard.¹¹

At the June 14 meeting Pollard learned that the state would not have to call a special session of the General Assembly to allocate state matching funds for the FERA operations. Hopkins told the Virginia delegation that the FERA would review each state's financial status, and then ask the states for matching funds appropriate to the state's ability to pay.¹² Because Hopkins was somewhat unclear about what he expected from the state in financial assistance, Virginia was able to avoid her financial responsibility several months. Yet, Virginia's failure to contribute her share to the FERA relief efforts did not keep the agency from granting the state some \$4.2 million in relief funds during the early months of its operation. This federal aid allowed between 80 and 100,000 Virginians to receive \$6.72 to \$8.31 each month during 1933.¹³

Formation of the state administrative framework progressed

smoothly; organization at the local level, however, was slow. The first communication from the Governor to the political sub-divisions came on June 21, 1933. He asked each county to submit data concerning its expenditures for relief from local, state and RFC funds during the first quarter of 1933.¹⁴ Two days later the Rockbridge Board of Supervisors learned that it would need to classify the county's unemployed by occupation and ability to work.¹⁵ It was not until July, however, that the VERA sent out its first "State Relief Bulletin," emphasizing the necessity for filing monthly reports in order to receive federal assistance, and explaining other aspects of the procedure for applying for these funds.

Throughout the summer confusion surrounded the county's efforts to gain federal aid for its needy. By September 20, 1933, Rockbridge County had not received any of the \$500 million appropriation. Yet this was not the state administration's fault. The County Clerk, Mr. A. T. Shields, had delayed sending the county's January report to the VERA until September of 1933. Furthermore, Shields had filled out the report on a form which the VERA had discontinued in July, and much of the information on the form was incomplete. The Clerk of the VERA sent several letters asking for the correct information,¹⁶ but it was not until September 28, 1933, that Clerk W. N. Anderson received the correct data concerning relief efforts during the first part of that year.¹⁷ No evidence suggests that there was an ulterior motive behind this delay. But because of the confusion about the application process, the county did not receive aid until the week of November 15, when the state

granted Rockbridge County \$2,500 as part of its first allocation.¹⁸

Another snag in the county's attempts to initiate its VERA activities was the absence of an administrator to direct local operations. Filling this position with a qualified individual was an all important concern; without an administrator the county could not receive federal funds. But the Board of Supervisors did not try to fill this position until October 20, 1933.¹⁹ The Board had received inquiries concerning the job as early as the fourth of that month, but had failed to act.²⁰ Finally, during the week of October 25, the Board met, and in accordance with section 2730 of the Virginia Code, decided to hire a director who met the approval of the state administrator. The Board granted the director authority "to investigate all complaints of persons in need in the county, to issue grocery or work relief orders for relief of such cases as are found to be in need."²¹

The Board gave the director the responsibility of acquiring from the state the funds to which the county was entitled. Furthermore, the Supervisors required the director to abide by the rules and regulations that the VERA established, and to maintain the necessary records and levels of relief that the federal government prescribed.

The VERA provided the county with the name of one candidate, Mrs. Elinor Robertson, who met its requirements for the position of Director. It suggested that she would bring the needed expertise to the office. Mrs. Robertson's qualifications, as she stated in her application, were numerous. She was a Registered Nurse and a graduate of William and Mary's extension school of Public Health

and Social Service. She had been Rockbridge County's Public Health Nurse for four years and had served as Executive Secretary of the local Red Cross chapter for seven months.²²

When it came time to vote on her appointment, however, the Board of Supervisors split. William A. Smith wrote to the Board that unless Mrs. Robertson or some other candidate received the "wholehearted support of the Board," the state would not feel obliged to grant funds to the county. Smith asked Rockbridge Circuit Court Judge Joseph A. Glasgow to appoint an individual to study the problem, and then based on his investigation, break the deadlock. Judge Glasgow selected Captain Greenlee D. Letcher, a highly respected resident of Lexington, to make the final decision on Mrs. Robertson's appointment. Letcher was in favor of Robertson for several reasons. He believed that she was qualified for the position according to VERA regulations. Her record pointed to a high level of competency in the jobs she had held in the past. Furthermore, she was already familiar with the area and its relief problems. Letcher also pointed out reasons why certain Board members had voted against Mrs. Robertson:

That against her appointment there has been urged the fact that certain friction has existed heretofore in local relief work which has aroused some feeling between what has been designated as factions and that it was feared that these factions would not loyally work together under her.²³

Letcher did not clearly explain the "factions" he criticized in his letter to the VERA administrator, but it seems probable that the debate concerning Mrs. Robertson's appointment divided those who wanted a traditional administrator who would treat the relief problem in a purely businesslike manner, and those who desired a

social worker to direct and administer relief to the needy. Social work was a relatively new profession in 1933, and many Virginians felt uneasy about giving financial responsibility to these workers. The former group probably supported A. P. Wade, an insurance and investment broker, the only other candidate for the position. The latter faction apparently was in favor of Mrs. Robertson's appointment.²⁴

During its next meeting, the Board of Supervisors appointed Mrs. Robertson to the post, and on November 8, 1933, an editorial appeared in the Gazette asking for cooperation from the community to help her with the relief program. It suggested that area residents should forget "personalities, likes and dislikes, theories, and fancies," and warned that any individual who attempted to block this operation because he " . . . thinks that relief should be administered in some other manner or through some other official, then there will be suffering."²⁵

With Mrs. Robertson's appointment, the local administration began to take form. The Board of Supervisors arranged for her to set up offices on the second floor of the First National Bank Building in Lexington, gave her \$100 a month in salary, and furnished her with an administrative budget of \$300 with which to hire two case workers and a secretary.²⁶ When Rockbridge County had finally established a local relief administration, the state released the funds which it had previously allocated to the county. But on November 15, when the county received its first grant, Congress had already initiated an entirely new relief program, the Civil Works Administration. FERA officials expected the winter

of 1933-1934 to bring a large increase in the number of unemployed, and thought a new program was necessary to meet the additional relief demand. Nevertheless, with the formulation of the CWA, the first stage of the FERA came to a close. Throughout this early period, the needy of Rockbridge County received nothing from federal or state funds.

Because the FERA operation failed to organize before November of 1933, the community's first exposure to the New Deal's relief efforts came with the programs of the Civil Works Administration. The federal government established the CWA as an organization entirely separate from the existing FERA operation.²⁷ The CWA provided the government with valuable lessons concerning the implementation of work relief programs. This information enabled officials to formulate the relief policies which they subsequently incorporated into the FERA after March, 1934 and into the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Because of the experimental nature of the CWA, historian Edward Williams viewed the operation as a "laboratory" where Harry Hopkins, director of President Roosevelt's relief programs, and his staff developed and evaluated new organizational techniques for work relief projects.²⁸ But the acquisition of this information was a long range benefit, and not the immediate goal the agency sought to achieve.

The President created the CWA to meet several objectives. Hopkins viewed the work programs of the FERA as unsatisfactory, especially the organization and the planning of its projects. More important, both Roosevelt and Hopkins thought that the hiring of four million people for a short period of time would inject

money back into the marketplace and stimulate economic recovery.²⁹

In forming the CWA, the federal government changed its role in combatting the relief problem. Unlike the FERA, the CWA was totally under federal control. The government did not use the grant-in-aid method to fund relief operations. Rather, it dispersed funds in the states through agents of the CWA. These representatives, who often were the local FERA administrators, made observations and evaluations about the relief needs of their areas, and the CWA granted financial assistance according to these evaluations, and not necessarily as state officials desired. Moreover, the federal government provided money for the materials that these projects required. In addition, the CWA demanded that half of its workers come from local relief rolls and the other half from the ranks of the unemployed who were not on relief.³⁰

Nationally, the CWA spent \$863,968,000 between November, 1933, and June 30, 1934. At the height of its operation, it employed 4,260,000 individuals.³¹

In Virginia, the CWA distributed \$12,969,819 in relief assistance, which ranked the Old Dominion twenty-sixth among the states in total funds received. All but \$753,000 came from the federal government. Because the administration required no matching funds, the State Legislature felt little obligation to contribute its own money to these programs. As a result, Virginia limited its contribution to \$1,094, and the individual counties supplied the rest of Virginia's appropriation. Only five states gave less to local CWA projects: Georgia, Idaho, Missouri, Nevada, and Tennessee.³² The Byrd machine continued its strangle hold on

the state's budget and saw no need to support social assistance programs.

Between December 1, 1933, and April 5, 1934, the CWA gave \$47,000 in assistance to District 5, an area which included Rockbridge and six other counties. At least 48,972 people received aid in the form of work relief in this district. In addition, the local CWA administrators provided \$36,146.76 for the purchase of material to carry out its project. The Rockbridge County CWA, under the direction of Charles W. Berry, received \$50,132.52 in federal funds, close to the average the agency gave to all District 5 counties. Federal financed assistance in this area ranged from a low of \$10,095.52 in Highland County to a high of \$85,074.84 in neighboring Augusta County.³³

The Civil Works Committee, which assisted Charles Berry in selecting local work projects had as its membership: Mrs. F. C. Davis, W. L. Foltz, G. A. Rhodes, R. P. Cooke, R. M. Irby, W. S. Moore, Greenlee P. Letcher and E. R. Flipppo.³⁴ While active it approved at least fourteen projects. Of particular note was the building of a swimming pool and stadium at Lexington High School and operation of sewing and stenographic work, which gave women employment.³⁵

This type of relief was very expensive for the federal government to carry out. The mounting costs of materials, workmen's compensation insurance and the lack of state matching funds brought demands throughout the country for the curtailment of the agency's activities. One politician, Al Smith, openly attacked the agency as wasteful, and stated, "Half-way between a lemon and

an orange is a grapefruit; half way between a public work and a relief work is civil work."³⁶ Congress had formed the CWA as a short term operation, and by February of 1934, work on CWA projects in Rockbridge County began to decline. By March 31 of that year, all projects in the county had stopped.³⁷ Officials moved CWA workers who qualified for relief assistance back to the FERA rolls, and once again the FERA found itself responsible for the care of hundreds of unemployed families in Rockbridge County.

Footnotes

¹Josephine Brown, Public Relief, 1929-1939 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1940; reprint ed., New York: Octagon Books, 1971), p. 146.

²Lexington Gazette, May 31, 1933, 7.

³Brown, Public Relief, p. 149.

⁴Ronald Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal in Virginia" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968), p. 89.

⁵Brown, Public Relief, p. 181.

⁶Ibid., pp. 205-207.

⁷Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 90.

⁸Virginius Dabney, Virginia: The New Dominion (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 493.

⁹Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 89.

¹⁰Lexington Gazette, June 21, 1933, 7.

¹¹Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," pp. 91-92.

¹²Lexington Gazette, June 21, 1933, 7.

¹³Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 92.

¹⁴Gov. Pollard to Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County, 21 June 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

¹⁵Arthur James, The State Becomes a Social Worker (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1942), p. 23.

¹⁶Clerk Anderson of VERA to Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County, 20 September 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

¹⁷Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County to Clerk Anderson of VERA, 28 September 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

¹⁸Lexington Gazette, November 15, 1933, 1.

¹⁹A. T. Shields, County Clerk, to William A. Smith, Director of VERA, 20 October 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

²⁰A. P. Wade to Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County,

4 October 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

²¹Lexington Gazette, October 25, 1933, 1.

²²Elinor Robertson to Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County, 11 October 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

²³Captain G. D. Letcher to Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County, 26 October 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

²⁴A. P. Wade to Board of Supervisors of Rockbridge County, 4 October 1933, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

²⁵Lexington Gazette, November 8, 1933, 4.

²⁶Ibid., November 15, 1933, 1.

²⁷Brown, Public Relief, p. 159.

²⁸Edward Williams, Federal Aid for Relief (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), pp. 112-113.

²⁹Brown, Public Relief, p. 159.

³⁰Doris Corothers, Chronology of the Federal Relief Administration, May 12, 1933 to December 31, 1935 (Washington: United States Gov. Printing Office, 1937), pp. 27-47.

³¹Brown, Public Relief, p. 159.

³²Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal," p. 94.

³³Lexington Gazette, April 11, 1934, 5.

³⁴Ibid., November 22, 1933, 1.

³⁵Ibid., March 28, 1934, 1.

³⁶Ibid., December 6, 1933, 7.

³⁷Ibid., April 4, 1934, 1.

CHAPTER III

FERA ATTEMPTS TO OFFER DIVERSIFIED RELIEF

After March 31, 1934, a new program of work relief took over the activities of the CWA. While the FERA was largely inactive during the CWA's existence, it nonetheless did not lose its organizational integrity. With the closing of the CWA program, the FERA prepared to absorb the new relief load. Unlike previous FERA programs, the new relief operation emphasized work relief whenever possible. While expensive, the work relief efforts of the CWA proved a desirable means of combatting the relief problem.¹

From its inception in May of 1933, the FERA was a joint operation of the state and federal governments. The CWA was a completely federal organization and did not use the grant-in-aid system of supporting relief efforts. In contrast the new FERA program emphasized dual responsibility in financing relief operations. States received federal aid based on evaluated need, but it required the states to contribute a portion of the relief on a matching basis.²

This revised version of the FERA brought a new set of instructions concerning the procedure for acquiring relief funds. Every request had to meet several requirements. The governor of each state had to submit an official request for funds. The state's application had to contain a "supporting statement." More specifically the FERA required a statement of monthly expenditures

for state relief operations. Finally the agency required a description of the relief program to which the state planned to distribute the funds.³

On February 15, 1934, President Roosevelt approved a \$950 million relief appropriation, and allocated \$500 million of this sum to the new FERA program. The President stated that the money would allow the FERA to meet the needs of three specific groups of unemployed. People living in large cities and rural areas, and those living in "single industry communities in which there is no hope of future reemployment" would receive aid from this program.⁴

To meet the needs of these three groups, officials organized the FERA into six divisions. The VERA was in turn responsible for establishing divisions similar to those of the federal program. To these six divisions the FERA added special projects such as adult education and student assistance. Some of these divisions, played a more significant role in Rockbridge County's relief operation than others.⁵

Although the FERA included a variety of relief programs, the major emphasis of the agency was to create work for the needy. The local FERA units spent a major portion of their time supervising the operation of their divisions. In light of the failure of earlier FERA work programs, officials of the new work division were intent on increasing the quality and diversity of their projects. Their special concern was the organization and supervision of local work relief projects. After March 31, 1934, FERA required a local sponsor to supervise the work and to provide the

necessary materials. Unlike the CWA, the FERA did not provide funding for project materials. The sponsor, which was usually the local political subdivision, had to submit an application for funds which the local FERA would use to compensate laborers on the projects. The state relief agency would decide whether the project warranted FERA financing.⁶

On March 20, 1934, the agency announced that "all wages must be paid by cash or by check."⁷ This new program evidently intended to follow the payment method of the CWA. But the Lexington Gazette of April 4, 1934, stated, "Workers, however, will not be paid in cash but in food, clothing, rent, etc. as needed in the various cases."⁸ The FERA based its payment method on population size. FERA regulations considered towns with populations less than five thousand as rural. Concerning rural areas, FERA declared that "work projects shall be developed to provide means of exchanging work for advances of consumable goods or capital goods for self-subsistence purposes."⁹ It also provided that local relief units could give cash payments only in "exceptional cases," and that compensation would be at a rate no lower than \$0.30 per hour. Finally, it required those on relief to maintain a "home garden."¹⁰ Apparently, the local relief unit was able to avoid cash payments because the VERA had classified Lexington and Rockbridge County as a rural area. That the VERA granted the town rural status is puzzling. The census reported that the population of Lexington for the years 1930 and 1940 was 5,602 and 6,060 respectively.¹¹

Because Virginia was predominantly rural, the Rural Rehabili-

tation division of FERA played a significant role in the state's relief efforts. The major goal of this program was to allow those in rural areas who had been on relief to escape the relief rolls and to become self-sufficient. Relief officials worked toward this goal either by rehabilitating families at home or by moving clients living on submarginal land to farms where they could provide for themselves. The agency provided relief in the form of loans which the recipient used to buy seeds, fertilizer, livestock, and tools. Each community was responsible for the selection of clients for the program.¹² In addition, the program required the state Emergency Administrations to submit a budget for its rehabilitation operation. States received grants to finance rural relief projects for several months at a time.¹³

The administration of the program in Virginia was the responsibility of H. H. Gordon. His primary function was to supervise the organization of local committees in each county. During the initial stages of the project, each county received funds to support five rural relief clients.¹⁴ Because the state refused to contribute its own funds, the number of clients that the program could support was severely limited. Apparently, the program did not begin in Rockbridge County until the first quarter of 1935.¹⁵ The Gazette stated that "the chief purpose of the Rural Rehabilitation is to select from the Relief Rolls those families most worthy of the opportunity and give them a chance to become self-sustaining citizens. To gain back their self-reliance, self-respect and independence."¹⁶ In Rockbridge County persons became eligible to enter the program by applying to several authorities.

First, they needed the approval of Mrs. Robertson, "Senior Visitor" of the FERA. Second, the local rural relief committee reviewed their applications. This group included Mrs. Robertson, McGowan, County Farm Agent, and a member of the Board of Supervisors, Rice Hotinger.¹⁷ Finally, the county field workers, Mrs. S. W. McCown and Mrs. Jane Alexander, carried out a survey of the families' needs and determined whether they could survive without direct relief.¹⁸ At its height during the months of April, May and June of 1935, the local project supported twenty-five clients.¹⁹

Unlike the county's rural relief program, its subsistence garden program received considerable publicity. In Virginia, this project allowed 177,000 families to produce a good portion of their food, relieving a heavy burden that the VERA would otherwise have had to carry.²⁰ In Rockbridge County, 296 families on relief received seeds. During May of 1934, the local VERA unit distributed boxes containing eighteen varieties of vegetable seeds along with onions, potatoes and fertilizer. In the summer of 1934, Janet Alexander, director of the local program, traveled 10,300 miles and made some 530 visits in supervising individual garden projects. The local unit also set up canning programs in seventeen communities in the county. It provided canners 94 dozen jars and 366 dozen jar caps. County relief gardens produced 10,260 quarts of vegetables valued at approximately \$1,805.35.²¹

Another important activity of the VERA in Rockbridge County was the Adult Education Program. This operation provided job opportunities for unemployed teachers. Participating teachers had to meet relief qualifications, just as did those employed on other

work relief projects.²² The FERA required the states to submit "fixed budgets" each month in order to receive aid, which the administration granted independently of the state's general relief allocation.²³ The FERA's national program emphasized several types of study. Remedial reading classes, vocational training and general adult education were some of the areas of instruction which the FERA offered. Local school officials supervised the program and selected the classes which the project offered in each community.²⁴ Men and women enrolling in these classes did not need to be recipients of relief; classes were open to the public at large.

Virginia hired between 1200 and 1250 teachers to carry out the program. Directed by J. C. Buck, it paid unemployed teachers approximately \$68 a month and spent almost \$14,500 a week. In addition to providing relief for unemployed teachers, state officials expected that the program would ". . . undoubtedly reduce to some extent Virginia's percentage of adult illiteracy."²⁵

Rockbridge area residents reacted positively to the program. The local FERA estimated that 1,161 men and women enrolled in these classes, and that the average daily attendance was 420 students. The county's program provided four groups of study. General adult education studied subjects such as the history of literature, handicrafts and current events. The trade and industrial education classes offered instruction in drawing blue prints and cabinet making. County residents could learn how to plan meals in the home economics curriculum. Finally, the elementary and high school education section provided instruction in simple

mathematics, spelling and Bible stories.²⁶

Most of those participating in the program found it valuable. The Gazette reported, "A questionnaire sent out from the office to students showed in every instance . . . that the students would like to continue their classes."²⁷ Not only did area students benefit from this project, but also twenty-one of Rockbridge County's teachers, sixty-three percent of the county's unemployed teaching force, found employment there.²⁸

The project was segregated. Although the available information does not give the number of Black teachers that the local VERA employed, evidence suggests that the program hired eight or nine Black instructors.²⁹ Apparently, the local relief office did not take significant steps to reduce "institutional racism." But it did, nonetheless, involve the Black community in the FERA program. Historian Ronald Heinemann pointed to the attention that the administration gave to the Black community, through the teachers program and the school improvement project at the "Lexington Colored School," as the reason for the decision of a majority of Virginia's Black population to vote Democrat in the 1936 presidential election, a "first in Virginia history."³⁰

One other educational project of the new FERA was the student assistance program. This program provided part-time work which enabled needy college students to remain in school. Like the Adult Education program, FERA left the supervision of this relief project to individual colleges and universities. Initially, the number of students to whom an institution could provide such relief was twelve percent of its total enrollment. Each state

received \$15 per work-study student enrolled. At its height, in March of 1935, this project supported 104,000 students.³¹

The program played a significant role in Lexington's relief efforts because of the two institutions of higher learning within its limits.³² During the first quarter of 1934, VMI formed a faculty committee to review applications for assistance. From a total of 172, it selected fifty-seven cadets for the program. Most of the recipients found jobs in their area of interest, ranging from clerical to laboratory to maintenance work.³³ By March of 1935, VMI was able to extend work assistance to seventy-eight cadets of the total 560 attending the Institute. Sixty-five to seventy-five percent of these students used the money to pay off educational loans, and others used it to buy textbooks and uniforms.³⁴ All-in-all, the program was successful, allowing many students who otherwise would not have been able to remain in school to receive a college education.

In short, the Student Relief, Adult Education and Subsistence Garden Programs and the Rural Rehabilitation project all added to the diversity of the new FERA operation. They met the needs of several groups of unemployed workers that had not received adequate assistance in the past. After March of 1934, however, the FERA's primary emphasis was small work projects. Harry Hopkins had convinced the President of the value of work relief, and Roosevelt perceived that the government's public work function was to "provide a bridge by which people can pass from relief status to normal self-support."³⁵ Because of this new emphasis on work relief, the county's ability to implement a works program became

the major factor in determining the overall success of the local FERA operation.

Footnotes

- ¹Lexington Gazette, April 4, 1934, 1.
- ²Edith Abbott, Public Assistance vol II: American Principles and Policies (University of Chicago Press, 1940; reprint ed., New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), p. 808.
- ³Ibid., p. 844.
- ⁴Doris Carothers, Chronology of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, May 12, 1933 to December 31, 1935 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1937), pp. 46-47.
- ⁵Lexington Gazette, April 4, 1934, 1.
- ⁶Edward Williams, Federal Aid for Relief (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. 28.
- ⁷Carothers, Chronology, p. 51.
- ⁸Lexington Gazette, April 4, 1939, 1.
- ⁹Carothers, Chronology, p. 51.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹United States Census 1930, VIII, Part 2, p. 1203 and United States Census 1940, VII, Part 7, p. 249.
- ¹²Williams, Federal Aid for Relief, pp. 138-142.
- ¹³Abbott, Public Assistance, 1:855-856.
- ¹⁴Lexington Gazette, January 30, 1935, 7.
- ¹⁵Ibid., March 6, 1935, 1.
- ¹⁶Ibid., April 17, 1935, 5.
- ¹⁷Ibid., January 9, 1935, 5.
- ¹⁸Ibid., April 17, 1935, 5.
- ¹⁹"Application and Certificate of Necessity," March 1935, p. 2, Relief Files, Rockbridge County Courthouse.
- ²⁰Lexington Gazette, March 20, 1935, 3.
- ²¹Ibid., November 21, 1934, 7.
- ²²Williams, Federal Aid for Relief, p. 135.
- ²³Abbott, Public Assistance, 1:855-856.

²⁴Lexington Gazette, August 1, 1934, 7.

²⁵Ibid., January 23, 1935, 1.

²⁶Ibid., June 5, 1935, 1.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., April 10, 1935, 1.

²⁹Ibid., June 5, 1935, 1.

³⁰Ronald Heinemann, "Depression and New Deal in Virginia"
(Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968), pp. 287-288.

³¹Williams, Federal Aid for Relief, p. 135.

³²All of the available information pertaining to this program
in Rockbridge County concerns the agency's involvement at VMI.

³³Lexington Gazette, SEptember 26, 1934, 7.

³⁴Ibid., March 6, 1935, 1.

CHAPTER IV

RELIEF OPERATIONS IN ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY SOUR

In early April of 1934, the VERA announced that it expected to begin work relief projects in Rockbridge County within the near future. Anticipating the renewal of a works program, the Board of Supervisors requested \$10,000 from the state agency, and appropriated \$2,000 out of county funds to support work which would take place during the months of April, May and June.¹ By April 11, 1934, however, the local VERA unit had not organized a work relief program. Except for general relief efforts, the only FERA project in operation at that time was the garden relief project run by Janet Alexander and the home demonstration program run by Elizabeth Carmichael. The county still needed a director of the works program.²

On April 13, 1934, the local relief unit began to organize. It appointed Phillips Day, a resident of Mountain View, Virginia, to be Projects Engineer for the county. Charles Berry, who had directed work relief in Rockbridge County for the CWA, apparently did not possess the necessary engineering expertise to qualify for the position. Day's immediate task as director of the local works division of the Emergency Work Administration (EWA) was to transfer the incomplete projects of the CWA to the EWA. Local officials of the CWA had left several projects unfinished. Improvements to Dutch Hollow Road in Walkers Creek District were still incomplete.

Construction of an intake dam on Moore's Creek remained halted. Finally, the construction of a gun shed at VMI had just begun when the CWA ceased operation.³ The Chief State Works Engineer, J. M. Ribble, stated that the VERA did not expect Virginia's work program to be able to continue the majority of the unfinished projects because of a lack of funds. Even if the state had approved completion of the county's CWA projects, there still existed a major stumbling block for the work.⁴

Unlike the CWA, the FERA did not provide insurance to compensate for the injury or death of workmen employed on the projects. The local sponsor of the work project, Rockbridge County or the Town of Lexington, was responsible for buying this insurance from a "commercial carrier." If the county or town did not do so, they themselves had to insure all workers in their employ. A memo from William A. Smith, VERA Director, stated that the agency "insists that the local authorities must assume at least that portion of their responsibility for the program if continued financial support from this administration is to be expected."⁵ If the county did not want to jeopardize the works program or any other state relief program, it would have to provide workmen's compensation insurance on its own.

In early May, W. L. Foltz announced that he, as agent for the county, had been unable to secure workmen's compensation insurance for the local VERA works division. He stated that no company was willing to assume such a risk. In response, the Board rescinded its March 28 order to appropriate \$2000 for work relief projects. Apparently the county was unwilling to assume the

insurance risk on its own. The Board also stated that it had taken this action because "no persons have been employed for labor on any project in this county since the end of the CWA in March."⁶ The Supervisors in turn appropriated \$1,000 from county funds for direct relief for the same period it had previously allocated \$2,000.⁷

The Board's action received immediate criticism from the local newspaper. An editorial in the Gazette charged that the Board had "thrown the local relief situation into a state of uncertainty."⁸ It expressed concern that the county's action might prompt the state to renege on its \$10,000 grant. The Gazette concluded: "To pay \$2,000 for \$10,000 in relief seems like too good a bargain to throw down."⁹

A week after the Board's May 14 action, Miss Harriet Tynes, assistant superintendent of the district VERA, met with the Supervisors to discuss the possible effects of their decision to reduce the county's relief allocation. She asked the Board to weigh the consequences of its action. The Supervisors heeded her warning, and appropriated another \$1,000 which brought the county's relief allocation to its May 14 level. The Board decided that the additional \$1,000 would not finance work relief projects, but instead would pay for the county's "long time welfare program."¹⁰ Shortly after the Board had followed Miss Tyne's advice, the Gazette interviewed the assistant superintendent. She praised the Board for its recent action: "I have never dealt with a more fair or more level-headed body of men. They are willing to cooperate and do their share in any undertaking which they deem

beneficial to the county."¹¹

Because of the confusion that the insurance issue created, the work projects of the county remained inactive. Although the VERA had authorized several of the proposed county projects as early as May 30, work had not yet begun. Construction of the intake dam on Moore's Creek, which would provide 500 man-hours of work, was at a standstill. Work on the town's water system between Diamond Avenue and Massie Street had not begun. Finally the community sanitation project, which would require 4,502 man-hours, remained unfinished.¹²

The delays that the insurance problem caused indicated the Board's lack of interest in certain types of relief for the county's unemployed. As early as May 23, rumors were circulating that several members of the Board wanted to close the relief office for the summer, regardless of the insurance issue. The prospect immediately drew criticism from the Lexington Gazette:

It seems absurd that the presence of spring weather, which carried with it the possibilities of eking out a living for almost everyone, should make our county leaders discard their farsighted views and think only of guarding the purse-strings for the present.¹³

In late June of 1934, the Board did curtail the local activities of the VERA for the months of July, August and September. Evidence suggests that Rice Hotinger was the Board member most responsible for this action. The Board of Supervisors was unwilling to give its full support to local relief efforts, at least in part because of a general attitude towards the poor and the unemployed that existed in the area. A common belief during this period was that poverty reflected some moral failing. The individual,

not society or the economy, was responsible for his plight. Only the "deserving poor" deserved help, and only private charity was an acceptable source of relief.¹⁴

The Supervisors' decision to curtail the local relief activities during the summer months left the FERA with what the Gazette called a "skeleton crew" to run direct relief operations in the county. The Supervisors kept Mrs. Robertson as director of the county relief program. She received a salary of \$100, paid from county funds. The only federal funds coming into the county for relief paid for the special projects of the FERA, such as the Subsistence Garden Program which received funds independent of the general relief allocation. Those who lost jobs with the relief program were Phillip Day, acting project engineer; J. W. Marks, auditor for the local office; Miss Carmichael, director of county home demonstrations; and Carl Rubb, who headed the county reemployment office.¹⁵

Once again the Gazette attacked the Board for its action. The newspaper questioned the wisdom of the decision and asked, "What will be the attitude taken by state officials when and if the local board finds next winter's need on a par with those of last winter?"¹⁶

The summer of 1934 brought a continued need by county unemployed for assistance. In July alone, 361 clients visited the relief office on the second floor of the First National Bank Building. Mrs. Robertson received 131 applications for relief, but was able to accept only 29 because of the lack of federal funds. Obviously there was a need that the county was unwilling

either to recognize or to meet.¹⁷

In late September, C. M. Stoddard, district engineer of the VERA, wrote to the Board asking if the county was going to reenter the FERA program. Stoddard stated that if the county Board of Supervisors planned to do so, it would need to notify his office and recommend a possible county project engineer.¹⁸ Within a few days, the Supervisors received notification that the VERA had approved the Board's request for \$10,000 with which to conduct relief activities during the months of October, November and December. The VERA approved Mrs. Robertson, acting Superintendent of Welfare for the county, as the local FERA Relief Director.¹⁹ On the same day, Miss Nancy McCullough received an appointment as aide to Mrs. Robertson.²⁰ It seemed as if the FERA organization was once again getting into full operation.

Although the relief office had reentered the federal program, there remained the problem of getting work projects started. On January 9, 1935, the Gazette remarked that the Town Council of Lexington turned down a proposal to use FERA workers on several city projects. The apparent reason was the "cost of compensation insurance and other expenses" which was greater than the benefits the work would bring.²¹ In response to a state questionnaire asking her to identify the major difficulties of the local relief program, Mrs. Robertson answered, "Getting work projects started in Lexington because of the lack of cooperation of the City Council."²²

While the Town Council was apprehensive about involving itself in work projects, residents increasingly argued that if

the community had to provide relief, then offering work relief would be more desirable than distributing the dole. In a report to the VERA office in Richmond, Mrs. Robertson remarked, "Our citizens seem to be very well satisfied with the program and are particularly interested in increasing the work program in place of direct relief."²³ The increasing support for work relief resulted in the county sponsoring additional projects. On May 15, 1935, the Lexington Gazette noted that the local FERA office had sent notices to 373 men on relief requiring them to report for work on the county's roads starting in early April of 1935.²⁴ This work was the first full-fledged work relief project the county sponsored.²⁵ By June of 1935, the local relief office was distributing some \$4,512.81 in wages and was spending only \$269.82 for direct relief operations.²⁶ Apparently, work relief had finally become the major emphasis of the county's relief office.²⁷

In summary, the works program of the local VERA was not able to provide relief for the county's unemployed until the spring of 1935. Because of the Board of Supervisor's unwillingness to give its total support to the program several hundred needy families went without assistance for almost a full year.

Footnotes

- ¹Lexington Gazette, April 4, 1934, 3.
- ²Ibid., April 11, 1934, 1.
- ³Ibid., April 18, 1934, 4.
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵Memo, William A. Smith to Mrs. Elinor Robertson, June 6, 1934, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.
- ⁶Lexington Gazette, May 16, 1934, 5.
- ⁷Ibid.
- ⁸Ibid., May 23, 1934, 4.
- ⁹Ibid.
- ¹⁰Ibid., May 30, 1934, 1.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 4.
- ¹²Ibid.
- ¹³Ibid., May 23, 1934, 4.
- ¹⁴William E. Garnett and Allen D. Edwards, Virginia's Marginal Population: A Study in Rural Poverty (Blacksburg: Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, July, 1941), p. 27.
- ¹⁵Lexington Gazette, June 27, 1934, 1.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 4.
- ¹⁷Ibid., August 15, 1934, 1.
- ¹⁸Stoddard to Board of Supervisors, 28 September 1934, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.
- ¹⁹Wall to Board of Supervisors, 6 October 1934, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.
- ²⁰Baker to Board of Supervisors, 6 October 1934, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.
- ²¹Lexington Gazette, January 9, 1935, 1.
- ²²Application and Certificate of Necessity, 10 December 1934, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.
- ²³Ibid.

²⁴Lexington Gazette, January 9, 1935, 1.

²⁵Unfortunately, the county FERA files and the other local sources fail to provide information about the specific projects the county sponsored. It appears that the projects were carried out in conjunction with the Public Works Administration and the State Highway Department.

²⁶Monthly Report of the VERA, May 1935, Exhibit E.

²⁷Application and Certificate of Necessity, 19 March 1935, p. 4, Relief File, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

CHAPTER V

THE UNMET NEED

Between July, 1933, and June, 1935, the federal government through its FERA program poured \$15,919,569 into Virginia.¹ By the summer of 1935, however, the FERA projects were coming to a close and a new agency, Works Progress Administration, was taking over the government's fight against unemployment.

To suggest that the local FERA program was a total failure would be incorrect. Several of the agency's projects, such as the Adult Education program, were quite successful. Yet the division which the FERA expected to do the most toward easing the suffering of the unemployed, the Works Program, failed to meet the area relief needs during much of the time that the agency was in operation. Programs which the federal government funded completely and operated independently were the most successful. In contrast, programs in which the government required the state to contribute part of the money and assume part of the administration floundered. The state government consistently refused to appropriate the money necessary to operate the programs, and local officials frequently lacked both the ability and the experience to administer them.

The local FERA administration did try hard to implement the agency's projects. The county was especially fortunate in having Mrs. Elinor Robertson, a trained social worker, to direct much of the relief efforts. Although her initial appointment was

controversial, her subsequent leadership of the organization drew little criticism. Shortly after her resignation on April 30, 1935, the Gazette remarked, "Those who know Mrs. Robertson and the high grade of efficiency and sincerity which characterized both herself and her work will undoubtedly appreciate why her resignation is looked upon with regret."² Under her supervision, the local relief unit was able to keep administrative costs relatively low--approximately 13% of the county's total relief expenditures. The national average for administrative costs was 10% but the same costs for other District 5 relief operations were approximately 15%.³

The relief the organization provided each of its clients, \$13.58, was well below the District average of \$18.60 but Mrs. Robertson did try to acquire more assistance for the area's unemployed. She noted in one application for state funds that "the local unit has not been able to meet the needs of the unemployed adequately because of lack of funds."⁴ Unfortunately, her efforts were largely unsuccessful.

The community was not willing to support wholeheartedly the relief operation. Area residents frequently complained that wages the relief agency paid were too high, and insisted either "that work hours should be increased so as not to compete with private industry," or that wages should be decreased.⁵ The federal government gave the county thousands of dollars for its relief operation, but the Board of Supervisors severely limited its own support of the relief program. For example, during May of 1935, the federal government provided \$10,245.19 for local relief.

The county's contribution for the same month was a mere \$218.45.⁶

The County Board of Supervisors was not entirely responsible for the inadequacy of the local relief operation, however. The state of Virginia was equally culpable. While the neighboring states of West Virginia and Maryland provided 9.4% and 18.2% respectively of their total relief expenditures, Virginia provided only .2% of the total spent in the Old Dominion.⁷ Both the selfish interests and the ultra-conservative economic philosophy of state political leaders interfered with the success of both local and state relief efforts. The views of the relief issue expressed by Congressman A. Willis Robertson of Rockbridge County are typical. During a speech on the floor of the House in late January of 1935, he soundly attacked Roosevelt's relief proposals and defended the refusal of his state to do more for its unemployed citizens:

. . . the financial integrity of the Commonwealth of Virginia was preserved not only by refusing to expend the proceeds of bond issues but by making personal sacrifices It was with this background, and representing in the House a section of Virginia that was settled and developed by industrious and thrifty Scotch-Irish and Dutch, that I approach the pending proposal⁸

Ultimately, the selfish pursuits of Senator Harry F. Byrd and his political machine far overshadowed Robertson's efforts to limit relief expenditures. In March of 1935, Byrd stated, "the time has come when temporary and emergency legislation should yield to sound principle." The Senator continued to place the interests of private enterprise ahead of the social needs of the state. According to Byrd, "The succession of many experimental devices to recapture prosperity confuses and frightens the

businessman. Businessmen cannot have faith unless they have good reason to believe that taxes will not absorb their reasonable profits."⁹

Byrd's cold-hearted approach to relief did not go unchallenged. One traditionally conservative newspaper, the Richmond Times-Dispatch, ran a series of articles criticising Virginia's refusal to meet her relief responsibilities. Even William A. Smith, Director of the VERA and a Byrd appointee, subtly spoke out against the conservative approach to relief. In an article in the Times-Dispatch, he stated, "It is needless, however, for me to attempt to conceal the fact that I am eager to see Virginia provide the needy-unemployed sufficient employment to enable them to earn the reasonable essentials of life."¹⁰

Historians such as George B. Tindale have concluded that unmet need in the South was greater than in any other region of the United States. They point out that the reluctance of Southern states to contribute to the relief program was the major reason for the inadequacy of relief operations in the area. This seems to have been the case in Virginia. When James W. Phillips, Assistant Commissioner of Public Welfare, attempted to determine whether Virginia had neglected her obligation to help the state's poor, he concluded that "Virginia has not in this instance been completely unmindful of her responsibilities."¹¹ He admitted, however, that the state could have contributed much more. He offered a perceptive explanation of why Virginians did not provide more for their needy:

The traditions of centuries cannot be thrown off

and forgotten in a few months. The bitter experiences of the past persist and condition both our thought and actions far into the future. Psychological fixations must be outlived. Even after one sees his duty, it is not always possible to perform it, "so free we seem, so fettered fast we are."¹²

I have attempted to describe the activities of the FERA on the local level. Although the relief activities carried out in Rockbridge County do not necessarily parallel the relief programs in other communities in Virginia, they do provide insight into some of the problems which the federal government faced in its efforts to provide relief to the unemployed. Without the full cooperation of both state and local officials, the FERA program was destined to be less than a complete success.

Footnotes

¹Edith Abbott, Public Assistance, vol. II: American Principles and Policies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940; reprint ed., New York: Russell, 1966), p. 868.

²Lexington Gazette, April 24, 1935, 4.

³Monthly Report of VERA, May 1935, Exhibit F.

⁴Application and Certificate of Necessity, 10 September 1934, Relief Files, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

⁵Application and Certificate of Necessity, 19 March 1935, p. 4, Relief Files, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

⁶Monthly Report of VERA, May 1935, Exhibit E.

⁷Abbott, Public Assistance, p. 868.

⁸Lexington Gazette, January 30, 1935, 1.

⁹Ibid., March 20, 1935, 6.

¹⁰Richmond Times-Dispatch, November 28, 1934, 5; November 25, 1934, 1; November 28, 1934, 8; November 27, 10.

¹¹Arthur James, The State Becomes a Social Worker (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1942), p. 239.

¹²Ibid.

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