

PRIMARY SOURCE PACKET

The New Deal and the Reinforcement of Race and Gender Hierarchies

U.S. History Since 1877

Central Discussion Question

Was the New Deal a transformative expansion of federal responsibility, or did it reinforce and institutionalize existing hierarchies of race and gender in American life?

Guiding Sub-Questions

1. Who was included in the New Deal's vision of economic security, and who was excluded?
 2. Was exclusion incidental — a byproduct of administrative necessity or political compromise — or was it structural, baked into the architecture of the programs themselves?
 3. What do these sources reveal about the assumptions policymakers made regarding gender roles and racial hierarchy?
 4. Does the evidence of exclusion and discrimination fundamentally change your evaluation of the New Deal's historical significance?
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PART ONE: RACE AND THE NEW DEAL

Document 1

Jesse O. Thomas, "Will the New Deal Be a Square Deal for the Negro?"

Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life, October 1933 (excerpts)

Jesse O. Thomas was the Southern Field Secretary for the Urban League in 1933. In this article, he analyzed the effect of the National Recovery Administration's wage codes on African Americans, particularly in the South, where employers were lobbying for racially tiered minimum

wages. Thomas's account captures the contradiction at the heart of the NRA's recovery program: an ostensibly universal minimum wage that was systematically subverted in practice.

The perplexing question to the employing class in all parts of America is, 'Can the National Recovery Act operate in such a manner as to prevent the Negro from sharing equally with other wage earners?' It is the most important element in the whole recovery set-up to the captains of industry in the South. Many white people in the South are dogmatically opposed to Negroes participating on equality with white people in any beneficial measures; and they insist that in the administration of relief and in the application of the minimum wage scale there must be an exception to the general rule when it comes to Negroes.

Thomas then quoted directly from the Thomasville (Georgia) Times-Enterprise, which articulated the logic of the racial wage differential with remarkable candor:

"It is safe to say that no store in town with delivery or porter service will sign an agreement to pay that boy fourteen dollars per week. If he does the messenger will be some white boy who will do the work satisfactorily. In that event we will have all white jobs and the Negroes out of work except in domestic circles. . . . When the Negroes get the idea that they are all going to be paid fourteen dollars per week, they are being poorly led, misinformed. They cannot hope to get that and any organization to attempt to put that over will meet with a form of resistance that will prove very very unfortunate to many of them. . . . The labor differential in the South is all that keeps us in competition."

— Thomasville (Georgia) Times-Enterprise, July 31, 1933, quoted in Thomas, Opportunity, October 1933

Thomas also quoted the Atlanta Constitution, which defended the NRA laundry code's differential wage for "female colored help" — set at 14 cents per hour compared to the \$13.50/week minimum for other workers:

"In view of the cheaper living conditions among the Negroes, they are done no injustice by such differentials. Comparatively they can receive the same improvement in condition by a small wage increase that a larger increase would bring to white labor. Unless such differentials are granted, the Negro is certain to suffer, because many would lose employment if a common minimum wage for both white and Negro labor was enforced."

— Atlanta Constitution, August 24, 1933, quoted in Thomas, Opportunity, October 1933

An Atlanta pencil factory sent this message to its more than 100 Black employees:

"If the 'false friends' of the colored people do not stop their propaganda about paying the same wages to colored and white employees this company will be forced to move the factory to a section where the minimum wage will produce the greatest production. Stop your 'friends' from talking you out of your job."

— Pink slip distributed by Atlanta pencil factory, September 1933, quoted in Thomas, Opportunity, October 1933

Thomas concluded with a note on the structural dimension of the problem:

"The double economic standard makes itself manifest in the relationship of the Negro wage earners to whites in every department of our economic and political life in this section. This has become such an established and accepted policy that the proposed shift required to meet the provisions of the NRA is little less than revolutionary."

— Jesse O. Thomas, Opportunity, October 1933

Note for Discussion: By 1934, three million Black workers in domestic service and agriculture were excluded entirely from NRA codes. Thomas's article shows that even for those nominally covered, enforcement of equal minimum wages was contested at every level. Ask students: Is the problem Thomas describes one of individuals, of law, or of structure?

Document 2

Social Security Act of 1935: Coverage Exclusions

Title II, Old-Age Benefits — Excluded Occupations

The Social Security Act of 1935 excluded from coverage approximately half of all American workers. Most notably, it excluded agricultural laborers and domestic servants. At the time, roughly 65 percent of all African American workers were employed in these two categories. The following are the relevant exclusion provisions from the Act itself, followed by a contemporary statistical summary from the Social Security Administration.

From the Social Security Act, Title II, Section 210 — Definitions

The term "employment" for purposes of the old-age insurance program (Title II) did not include:

Agricultural labor; domestic service in a private home; casual labor not in the course of the employer's trade or business; service performed as an officer or member of the crew of a vessel documented under the laws of the United States or of any foreign country; service performed in the employ of the United States Government or an instrumentality of the United States; service performed in the employ of a State, a political subdivision thereof, or an instrumentality of one or more States or political subdivisions; service performed in the employ of a corporation, community chest, fund, or foundation, organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, literary, or educational purposes. . .

The practical effect of these exclusions was stark. A 1985 Social Security Administration report noted that at the program's inception, "excluded were agricultural laborers, domestic servants in private homes, those engaged in casual labor not in the course of their trade."

Demographers and historians have calculated the racial impact. According to the Social Security Administration's own research, approximately 65 percent of African American workers were engaged in agricultural and domestic work in 1930 — and thus were excluded from the old-age insurance program. African Americans made up 11.3 percent of the labor force in 1930 but constituted 23 percent of the excluded workers.

The question of intent remains historically contested. Some scholars, including Ira Katznelson, argue that Southern Democrats in Congress insisted on the exclusions as a condition of their support. Others, including Social Security Administration historian Larry DeWitt, argue that the exclusions were driven primarily by administrative feasibility — it was genuinely difficult to collect payroll taxes from scattered farm and domestic employers. The act's own framers, including Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, stated publicly that they hoped coverage would eventually be extended to these workers.

Note for Discussion: Both interpretations may be true simultaneously. Ask students to consider: does it matter whether the racial exclusion was intended, if the structural result was the same? What does it mean for a law to be "color-blind" when it produces racially unequal outcomes?

Document 3

FDR to Walter White, May 1935: "My Hands Are Tied"

Walter White Resigns from the Advisory Council for the Virgin Islands, May 6, 1935; and FDR's Reported Explanation of His Position, Spring 1934

Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, spent much of 1934–1935 lobbying President Roosevelt to publicly support the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill, which would have made lynching a federal crime. The following are three related documents capturing the exchange: FDR's own reported words to White, White's eventual resignation from a minor administration post, and Eleanor Roosevelt's private expression of sympathy.

FDR's Reported Words to Walter White, Spring 1934

According to Walter White's own account of their May 1934 meeting at the White House — confirmed in subsequent scholarship and recounted in a 1998 PBS documentary — Roosevelt explained his position in these terms:

"If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can't take that risk."

— Franklin D. Roosevelt to Walter White, White House meeting, Spring 1934, as recounted by White

Walter White to President Roosevelt, Resignation Letter, May 6, 1935

After the Costigan-Wagner Bill was filibustered to death by Southern senators in May 1935, White wrote to the President resigning from the Advisory Council for the Government of the Virgin Islands:

"I cannot continue to remain even a small part of your official family."

— Walter White to Franklin D. Roosevelt, May 6, 1935, FDR Presidential Library

That same month, a scathing editorial was circulated to members of the Senate. White mailed Eleanor Roosevelt a copy. She forwarded it to the President with a handwritten note:

"Pretty bitter, isn't it? I can't blame them though."

— Eleanor Roosevelt, handwritten note to FDR, May 1935, FDR Presidential Library

Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, Spring 1935

Writing to White after the bill's defeat, Eleanor Roosevelt expressed her personal distress:

"I am so sorry about the bill. Of course all of us are going on fighting, and the only thing we can do is hope that we will have better luck next time."

— Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, Spring 1935, as quoted in Paul M. Sparrow, FDR Library Blog, 2016

The editorial White had sent her stated:

"When the next mob dances in the light of flames about a stake in the south, [FDR's] declaration of high duty and intent will be a ghostly wisp of smoke, drifting off toward the heavens."

— Editorial circulated to U.S. Senate members, May 1935, quoted by Walter White

Note for Discussion: FDR's position offers a classic case study in political calculation versus moral imperative. Note that Congress would not pass federal anti-lynching legislation until 2022. Ask students: Was FDR's compromise defensible? Who or what made it necessary? What does Eleanor Roosevelt's role reveal about the limits of allied advocates working within a system?

PART TWO: GENDER AND THE NEW DEAL

Document 4

Section 213, Economy Act of 1932

Public Law 212, 47 Stat. 406 — and the Women It Displaced

The Economy Act of 1932 — signed by President Hoover but enthusiastically continued under FDR's New Deal administration — included Section 213, which required that in any reduction of federal personnel, employees whose spouses also worked for the federal government must be dismissed first. In practice, because wives almost always earned less than their husbands, it was overwhelmingly women who lost their jobs. Between 1,600 and 1,800 women lost federal positions under the law before it was repealed in 1937.

Text of Section 213, Economy Act of 1932

In any reduction of personnel in any branch or service of the United States Government or the District of Columbia, married persons (living with husband or wife) employed in the class to be reduced shall be dismissed before any other persons employed in such class are dismissed, if such husband or wife is also in the service of the United States or the District of Columbia. In the appointment of persons to the classified civil service, preference shall be given to persons other than married persons living with husband or wife, such husband or wife being in the service of the United States or the District of Columbia.

— Section 213, Economy Act of 1932, Public Law 212, 47 Stat. 406

The law was gender-neutral in its text — legislators had removed explicit reference to wives in order to, as a contemporary account noted, avoid "the political effect, if discrimination against women were otherwise so clearly and forcibly shown." But it was not gender-neutral in practice. As Frances Perkins herself acknowledged, "The woman 'pin-money worker' who competes with the necessity worker is a menace to society, a selfish, shortsighted creature, who ought to be ashamed of herself." Even the New Deal's most prominent female official was not fully committed to the principle of married women's employment.

Doris Holmes Blake to the Secretary of Agriculture, June 26, 1933

Doris Holmes Blake was an entomologist at the Smithsonian's Bureau of Entomology. She wrote the following letter upon receiving her termination notice under Section 213:

"I am one of the married women in your Department who has to-day received notice of dismissal. I am 41 years old, am college trained with a Master's Degree from Radcliffe College, am Phi Beta Kappa, and all the other fixings, and have

been in the Bureau of Entomology since 1919 (14 years). I am one of the few women who has ever been able to work up to being an Assistant Entomologist in this Bureau."

— Doris Holmes Blake to the Secretary of Agriculture, June 26, 1933, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7310, Box 5, Folder 14

Gussie E. Howell to the National Woman's Party, February 1936

Howell, a former employee of the U.S. Railway Mail Service, was dismissed under Section 213 in October 1933 and wrote to the National Woman's Party's Government Workers' Council:

"As Howell related her experiences, she had worked for the United States Railway Mail Service until October 1933, when she suddenly found herself dismissed under Section 213. . . . [S]he went to her congressional and local representatives to seek a remedy, only to receive 'all kinds of nice promises . . . but no action.' In addition, not only had she and her husband lost their house, but Howell could no longer provide for her seventy-two-year-old father, widowed sister, and her sister's two children. 'I certainly want to assist in any way possible to see that [Section 213] is repealed,' she concluded, adding that the statute constituted the 'most unjust piece of legislation.'"

— Gussie E. Howell to Grace Brewer, National Woman's Party, February 1936, as quoted in John Thomas McGuire, *Journal of Policy History*, 2008

Note for Discussion: Section 213 predates FDR but was maintained throughout the New Deal. Ask students: What assumptions about gender roles does this law embed? Why did Frances Perkins — Labor Secretary and the first female Cabinet member — not push harder for its repeal? What does it reveal that even women advocating against Section 213 often framed their arguments in terms of family hardship rather than equal rights?

Document 5

The Social Security Act's Gender Architecture

The Male Breadwinner Model and Its Consequences for Women

The Social Security Act did not merely exclude certain workers; it was structurally organized around the assumption of a male breadwinner and a female dependent. Old-age insurance benefits were tied to wage labor in the formal economy. The system's most generous provisions flowed to workers with long, continuous records of wage employment — patterns typical of men — while women who worked intermittently, part-time, or in the home received less protection or were covered only as dependents of their husbands.

The original Act also created Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), the public assistance program for poor families headed by single mothers. ADC was means-tested, morally supervised, and

administered by states — with very different treatment of Black and white families in practice. The following excerpt is from a 1935 Women's Bureau Bulletin report assessing the Act's impact on women workers.

Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, on Women and Social Security, 1936

Women's Bureau Director Mary Anderson testified and reported extensively on the Act's structure. Her analysis identified the core problem:

"The wage earner is assumed to be male. The wife, in the framework of the Act's insurance provisions, is not a worker in her own right but a dependent of her husband's employment record. A woman who works intermittently, who moves in and out of the labor force as family circumstances require, accumulates few benefits. The woman who does not work for wages at all — who performs the indispensable labor of the home — is entitled to nothing in her own name. Only her husband's death or disability gives her access to what the system provides."

— Paraphrased and condensed from Women's Bureau analyses of the Social Security Act, 1935–1937; see Mary Anderson, "Women Workers and the New Deal," January 9, 1937, Records of U.S. Department of Labor's Women's Bureau

The structure of the WPA — the New Deal's largest work relief program — replicated this logic. Only one member of a household could qualify for a WPA relief job. Because men were assumed to be heads of households, women with employed or "able-bodied" husbands could not qualify, even if their husbands could not find work. Women who proved themselves to be economic heads of households could receive WPA employment, but in lower-wage "women's work" categories at rates substantially below those paid to men.

Note for Discussion: The Social Security Act today remains the foundation of U.S. retirement and disability policy. Ask students to trace the connections between the gendered assumptions of 1935 and ongoing debates about Social Security, the gender wage gap, and caregiving labor. When does structural inequality become invisible?

A Note on Secondary Literature

Students wishing to explore these themes further should consult:

Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (2005) — the foundational argument that New Deal policies constituted structural affirmative action for white workers.

Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (2001) — the definitive study of gender and New Deal labor and welfare policy.

Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (1996) — a nuanced account of the progressive interracial coalition that emerged from the New Deal, alongside its limitations.

Larry DeWitt, "The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act," *Social Security Bulletin* (2010) — the case against the racial-intent thesis, for context on historical debate.