

A Brief History of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

On Tuesday October 29, 1929, the Wall Street Stock Market crashed during what is now known as “Black Tuesday.” While not the sole cause, this event has been labelled as the start of the Great Depression of the 1930s: the worst financial crisis to impact the United States. Over the few years following “Black Tuesday,” businesses failed and millions of workers across the United States were forced into unemployment. By 1933, for example, thirteen percent of the United States’ population was unemployed: a total of 12.8 million people. The most common scapegoat for the disaster was the current President of the United States, Herbert Hoover (31st President, 1929-1933). This distaste is most easily seen through the title given to the slums that developed across the United States: Hoovervilles. Consequently, in the election of 1932, Hoover was voted out of office almost unanimously in favor of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (32nd President, 1933-1945).



To combat the rampant unemployment rate, President Roosevelt began to implement his New Deal: a series of programs designed to provide public relief across the entire United States. The first of these programs was known as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The development of this program began on March 9, 1933 with the goal of providing jobs for 500,000 men by the beginning of the summer. This goal was eventually reduced to 250,000, quickly passed through Congress, and was signed into law on March 31. On April 7, the first enrollee was selected, and on April 17 the first camp was opened in Luray, Virginia. By late July, 301,230 men were enlisted in the CCC.

The CCC was very attractive to unemployed veterans and young men because it provided a great deal of benefits: \$30 a month, free medical examinations, free food, free housing, and free education. To qualify for these benefits, however, the CCC enrollees were given a series of conservation and infrastructure maintenance tasks. These included constructing trails, bridges and dams, planting trees, fencing off reforested areas, creating fish-rearing ponds, developing streams, protecting water banks, fighting fires, conducting pest removal, installing pipe and tile lines, searching for downed aircrafts and missing hunters, constructing picnic tables, making signs, and many other duties in a similar vein. However, since many of the CCC enrollees were from cities and had no experience with any of these tasks, the government hired local experts known as Local Experienced Men (LEMs) to train and oversee the CCC workers. This process of local consultation allowed the CCC programs to be successful and for the small local populations to acknowledge and appreciate the work that the CCC was doing.

As the economy stabilized in the later 1930s and as the world drew closer to World War II in the early 1940s, the need for the CCC began to decline. By 1942, the unemployment rate was 4.7 percent and the need for the CCC came to a halt. On June 30, 1942, the CCC came to an end after a successful nine years. All in all, the CCC did what it was intended to do: provide jobs to hundreds of thousands of desperate men across the nation in a time of need. It is thanks to the CCC and New Deal programs like it that the United States survived the Great Depression and moved forward to what it is today.