Are there any public buildings or public structures in your community that were built during the 1930’s? Do you see those dates on any cornerstones near you? If so, they might have been constructed through a New Deal program during the “Public Works Era”.

In October I was able to attend the Wisconsin Historical Society’s annual Local History and Historic Preservation Conference, held virtually this year, and “The Legacy of the Public Works Era in Wisconsin” was the title of one of the lectures. It was presented by Daina Penkiunas, Wisconsin’s State Historic Preservation Officer.

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) deals with old buildings, and “administers the National Historic Preservation program at the State level, reviews State Register and National Register of Historic Places nominations, maintains data on historic properties that have been identified but not yet nominated to the registers, and works with state and federal agencies during the relevant federal, state or local unit of government statutory historic preservation law reviews.”

The “Public Works Era” was the 1930’s to early 1940’s, and was a federal response to the Great Depression. Daina explained that these New Deal public programs included the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), which operated from 1933 to 1942, and the WPA (Works Progress Administration), which operated from 1935 to 1943. Public buildings and infrastructure built during the 1930’s were often the result of New Deal programs. Buildings included post offices and schools, and infrastructure included bridges and sewer systems.

The PWA (Public Works Administration) operated from 1933 to 1939, and one of its projects was to improve existing rural schools. Daina told us that these modernizations included basements, for indoor bathrooms and extra activity space, and vestibules, to keep out the cold and to shelter access to the basements.

Some of Vernon County’s country schools certainly saw these structural changes – comparing old photos, you can often see that a schoolhouse had a porch in the early 1900’s, which was converted into a vestibule, an enclosed entryway, sometime later. I wonder if any of these schoolhouse modifications in Vernon County were funded by the PWA.

Post offices were also built through PWA funding, with the largest number of post offices being built in 1937. The Viroqua post office is in a federal building constructed in 1939, so probably a PWA project.

The Viroqua P.O. also boasts a mural painted during the Public Works Era. I’ve always thought it strange that the mural is painted right over and around the postmaster’s door, but Daina explained that this was the required placement for these New Deal murals, “above the postmaster’s door”. The murals were also required to depict “the American scene” – Viroqua’s mural is a scene from the Blackhawk War. Post office murals belong to the federal government.

Something you can do during these pandemic times is to go outside and look around your community for public works projects dating to the 1930’s and early 1940’s. Let us know what you find!