Local Relief in Middletown During the Great Depression
1930-1933

By Jesse Nasta

Hist171
Professor Schatz
12-20-02
Acknowledgments

In an annual report of the librarian of the Russell Library, written in April 1933, Nathaly Newton wrote that the Russell Library was the only place where many of the more than 1,000 unemployed residents of Middletown could go to relax and forget their troubles through books.

Just as the Russell Library was a great comfort to unemployed Middletown residents in 1933, it was a great comfort to me as I set out in 2002 to research the unemployed. I would like to sincerely thank Ms. Denise Russo, a librarian at the Russell Library, for all of her assistance. On more than one occasion she voluntarily spent her lunch break lugging crates of unsorted Common Council records from the library’s basement for me.

I would also like to thank Mr. Joseph Salafia, Mrs. Mary Salafia, Mr. Jesse Salafia, Mrs. Esther Waller, and Mr. Arthur Bielefieid for generously sharing their memories of the Great Depression with me. Even if they are not quoted directly in this essay, the conversations I had with them provided me with invaluable insight into this time period, a time that I know what not easy for them to re-visit.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who gave me information throughout my research, including Mr. Nathan Olshin, Mr. Tom Salafia, and Mrs. Linda Salafia who, as an employee of City Hall, was able to track down records for me.
In 1931, as the unemployment rate in America rose over 6 million, President Herbert Hoover said, "The humanism of our system demands the protection of the suffering and the unfortunate. It places the prime responsibility upon the individual for the welfare of his neighbor, but it insists also that in necessity the local community, the State government, and in the last resort, the National government shall give protection to them (Warren 196)."

The relief of the unemployed in Middletown, Connecticut so closely followed the sequence of municipal relief, followed by state relief, and, finally, federal relief for the unemployed, that President Hoover could have easily been referring to this city, instead of the nation as a whole, when he made this statement.

During the first months of the Great Depression, however, the situation was very different; state and federal relief for the unemployed was still a long way off. In fact, despite the recent stock market crash, the 1930s began optimistically in Connecticut. The January 1, 1930 edition of the Middletown Press boasted that, "Middletown is only at the threshold of better days," pointing to the fact that the post office had taken in more money during the previous year than during any other one year period (Middletown Press, January 1, 1930, 4).

In his unofficial New Year statement, John H. Trumbull, governor of Connecticut, predicted that the country was about to enter a period of prosperity surpassing that which it had enjoyed the previous five years. Rather than
expressing concern over the stock market crash, Trumbull said, "The effect of the recent decline in the stock market has, I believe, proved beneficial to us all, in that it has reacted as a signal to 'stop, look and listen (Middletown Press, January 1, 1930, 2)."

In Middletown, statistics indicated that local employment was holding up well. Although the Chamber of Commerce kept no figures relating to the Remington Noiseless Typewriter Corporation, Omo Manufacturing Company or the I.E. Palmer Company, its records indicated that, in April 1930, the number employed in other Middletown factories was 5,247, only 37 less than the corresponding period in 1929 (Middletown Press, June 5, 1930, 1).

By the next month, however, that number had dropped to 5,137. This was still 246 more than were employed in May 1928 (Middletown Press, July 1, 1930, 1). In other areas, employment was on an upward trend. The number of persons in Middletown employed by merchants, bankers, insurance offices, and automobile dealers was 931, against 872 for the corresponding period in 1929 and 864 in 1928 (Middletown Press, July 1, 1930, 1).

Employment statistics, however, were misleading. It was becoming increasingly evident that the governor's New Year statement was nothing more than a fantasy. Many of Middletown's factory workers were only employed part-time. Furthermore, Middletown, like all cities in Connecticut, began to face considerable unemployment (Middletown Press, July 1, 1930, 1).
The first sign of alarm was a very subtle one, a small article in the January 29, 1930 issue of the Middletown Press, buried in the bottom corner of the front page. Raymond H. Wilcox, Superintendent of Charities and First Selectman, had prepared the Charity Department’s budget for the 1930-1931 fiscal year and was to submit it to Mayor Frederick Bielefield and the charity committee of the Common Council the following afternoon. Wilcox requested $41,040, an increase of $1,200 over the 1929-1930 budget, because of the department’s outside poor account. This account provided food, fuel, and rent to the needy that applied to the Charity Department for aid. The outside poor account for 1930-1931 was $13,960, surpassed by the hospital account of $17,000 (Middletown Press, January 29, 1930, 1).

In January 1930 neither Wilcox nor anyone else could have known how inadequate the Charity Department’s outside poor account would prove to be during the coming year. There were signs, however, that unemployment was a growing national problem. In January 1930, as Wilcox was preparing his budget, President Hoover advised appropriations of $60 million to start Boulder Dam, $75 million for highways, $500 million for public buildings, and $150 million for rivers and harbors (Warren 118). Hoover continued to stress the need for public works by states and municipalities, however, in 1930, federal aid for states, municipalities, and individuals was not yet in sight. Hoover repeatedly insisted that unemployment was a local responsibility, with the federal government standing
back ready to lend a hand only when states and municipalities no longer could handle the problem (Warren 130).

In 1930, Middletown could handle its unemployment problem. This is not to say, however, that unemployment in Middletown did not put a strain on the city’s charity system. As early as February 1930 it became apparent to Wilcox that this was not an ordinary time for the Charity Department. On February 7, Wilcox said that, daily, he had insistent and increasing requests for aid (Middletown Press, February 7, 1930, 1). During the winter of 1928-1929, most of the requests were from widows with small children. In January and February 1930, however, more and more unemployed heads of families were coming to his department anxious to secure work (Middletown Press, February 7, 1930, 1).

As 1930 wore on, unemployment became increasingly worse. By the summer, the Municipal Building was inundated every day with scores of men seeking work (Middletown Press, July 2, 1930, 1). On July 2, 1930 the Middletown Press reported that the city administration was doing everything possible to provide work for these men. By this time, Wilcox said there was more unemployment in Middletown than at any time since he assumed office, with 101 families receiving aid from the city (Middletown Press, July 1, 1930, 1).

The national scene was just as bleak. By April 1930, about one million American families were without breadwinners. Other figures indicate that 4.5 million were unemployed in addition to the usual quota of unemployables (Warren 188).
Like the federal government, the city administration increased public works as a means of employment. In exchange for relief, the Charity Department would put men to work on the highways. By July 1, 1930, the department had 16 men assigned to this job, more than at any other time in the city’s history (Middletown Press, July 1, 1930, 1). Wilcox would give priority to men with families, providing them with work for a week and then replacing them with other unemployed family men.

Other city departments provided work as well. At this point, the city was simply “making work” wherever jobs could be found. For instance, under the direction of G. Allen Schaefer, Superintendent of Public Works, about 25 unemployed men were given work laying a six-inch water main on Bretton Road in July 1930. The work could have been done using ditch-digging machinery, but, instead, Schaefer had it done with hand shovels to provide work for the men (Middletown Press, July 2, 1930, 1).

Similar projects were being done across the city. On July 2, 1930, the street department was providing work for 27 men, and eight men were regularly employed in the Water Department (Middletown Press, July 2, 1930, 1).

However, the city’s attempts to provide work could not keep up with the increasing demand. During the summer of 1930, applications for aid from the Charity Department were the heaviest on record (Middletown Press, August 2, 1930, 1). From March 30, 1930 through June 30, 1930 the Charity Department disbursed $17,814.62, some $3,472 more than during the corresponding period in
1929. As early as July 23, 1930 the Charity Board began to realize how difficult it would be to care for the unemployed that winter if conditions did not quickly improve (Middletown Press, July 23, 1930, 16).

Conditions showed no signs of improvement. On the morning of September 5, 1930, 35 men were in line waiting for Wilcox to arrive at his office (Middletown Press, September 6, 1930, 1). This was not atypical. On September 6 the Middletown Press reported, “From early morning until late in the afternoon his office is besieged by applicants for work or assistance (Middletown Press, September 6, 1930, 1).” Wilcox knew that the Charity Department’s $14,000 outside poor appropriation for the 1930-1931 fiscal year would be nowhere near the amount needed to carry Middletown’s unemployed through the winter. By the end of October 1930, only six months into the fiscal year, the outside poor fund had been exhausted (Middletown Press, October 28, 1930, 1). The Charity Department had no more funds allocated for the outside poor, and winter, the season in which it always had its greatest number of applicants for aid, had not yet arrived. Immediate action had to be taken.

On October 29, 1930, as the last dollars of the Charity Department’s outside poor account were being distributed, the directors of the Middletown Chamber of Commerce met to develop a plan to aid the city’s unemployed. At the meeting, also attended by Mayor Bielefield, Wilcox, and Frank T. Davis, president of the Council of Social Agencies, the directors voted that Mayor Bielefield appoint a citizens’ committee. The committee’s duty would be to set up a free
employment bureau in Middletown where the unemployed could voluntarily register and record both their needs and abilities. The employment bureau also encouraged local employers, business owners, and regular citizens to register any type of work they could provide the unemployed. (Middletown Press, October 30, 1930, 1).

Similar efforts to register the unemployed were being carried out across the country. Early in 1930, President Hoover had supported the proposal of Senator Robert F. Wagner, New York Democrat, to provide adequate statistical coverage of unemployment (Warren 119). However, the action of the New England Council had a more direct effect on Middletown than federal proposals. The council, which had urged the Middletown Chamber of Commerce to register the unemployed in Middletown, pointed out that the more quickly communities registered their unemployed, the better equipped they would be to cooperate with the governors of the states, and, through them, with President Hoover’s recently formed Emergency Committee on Unemployment (Middletown Press, October 30, 1930, 1).

Mayor Bielefield acted quickly. On October 30, 1930, the day after meeting with the directors of the Middletown Chamber of Commerce, he appointed a committee on unemployment. Dr. James L. McConaughy, president of Wesleyan University, was appointed chairman. Committee members were Rev. Herbert D. Rollason, pastor of the South Congregational Church, Rev. Frank Flood German, rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity, and Rev. Denis F. Baker, pastor of St. John’s Roman Catholic Church (Middletown Press, October 30, 1930, 1).
On October 31, 1930, following their first meeting, the committee issued a public statement explaining the object of the employment bureau they were setting up. The statement, in part, read, "The situation is very serious. It means not only lack of money with which the necessities of living are met, but it means an assault upon a man's self-respect and just pride as the head of his family. That means a serious thrust at the welfare of our civic life (Middletown Press, November 1, 1930, 1)."

The next day, the mayor's committee issued a statement that applicants for work should fill out forms and mail them to the Bureau of Employment which was to open on November 3, 1930, a Monday. (Middletown Press, November 1, 1930, 1).

On Monday morning, instead of mailing applications for work, unemployed men began to gather in front of the Municipal Building at 8 o'clock, two hours before the bureau was to open. Before 9 o'clock a steady procession of men was filtering into city chambers (Middletown Press, November 3, 1930, 1). By the time the bureau closed at 3 P.M. that day, 131 jobless men had registered for work. Some 53 of these men were normally employed as unskilled laborers. The other occupations included 15 weavers, 11 shphands, 10 masons, eight mechanics, six salespeople, five truck drivers, three carpenters, three clerical workers, two plumbers, two timekeepers, two winders, two braidahs, two electricians, two draftsmen, one waiter, one chauffeur, one stenographer, one dyer, and one painter (Middletown Press, November 5, 1930, 1).
On November 4, 1930, the second day the Bureau of Employment was functioning, an additional 56 men registered for work (Middletown Press, November 5, 1930, 1). By November 7, 1930, the number of applicants for work totaled 275 (Middletown Press, November 7, 1930, 1). On the same day, E.R. Mertens, works manager at Middletown’s Welker-Hoops Company, proposed that each of the company’s 125 to 150 employees donate one percent of their weekly wages to the unemployed. Not one employee refused to do so. The company’s office immediately began deducting $35 to $40 each week from the company’s payroll and donating it to the Family Welfare Association (Middletown Press, November 7, 1930, 1).

Others in Middletown followed Mertens’ lead. The day after the agreement went into effect at the Welker-Hoops Company, Salvatore Adorno, proprietor of the Palace Theater, made a similar pledge. He promised to donate 20 percent of the profits for 50-cent orchestra seat tickets sold on certain days of the week to the Family Welfare Association (Middletown Press, November 8, 1930, 1). At that point, the Family Welfare Association and the city’s Charity Department were providing aid to those in dire need of food as well as fuel for heating their homes.

On November 12, 1930, the mayor’s committee estimated that there were approximately 500 unemployed in Middletown, 360 of whom had registered with the Bureau of Employment. Only 31 of them had been given work through the bureau (Middletown Press, November 12, 1930, 1). This small number of employers in relation to the number of unemployed demonstrated the Bureau of
Employment’s inability to solve the unemployment problem without outside aid. The mayor’s committee decided it was time to turn to the people of Middletown for this aid. On the same day, the committee announced, “We feel the greatest need is for work, not charity, or a ‘dole.’ We wish to provide work for the man who wants to support his family and not accept charity (Middletown Press, November 12, 1930, 1).” To provide work for the unemployed, the committee proposed that the employed citizens of Middletown donate one percent of their weekly salaries to the committee’s fund. With the funds that came through the committee, the city would employ men to do manual labor three days a week at 40 cents per hour. Working eight hours per day, the men were to receive $9.60 weekly. If a physically capable man did not choose to work, the committee felt that he, “has little or no claim on the community (Middletown Press, November 12, 1930, 1).”

Statistics show that the vast majority of Middletown’s unemployed wanted work instead of charity. By November 13, 1930, 10 days after the Bureau of Employment opened, 361 men had registered for work (Middletown Press, November 13, 1930, 1) while only 19 applied for aid from the Charity Department during the month of November 1930 (Wilcox, November 1930).

It appears a great many Middletown residents felt that it was their obligation to give part of their earnings to help these men find work. As R. Stanley Wicks, assistant district manager of the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, wrote in a letter to Mayor Bielefield on November 14, 1930, “Realizing
that conditions now in Middletown demand some sacrifice on the part of those who are employed...my five men and myself pledge one percent of our earnings to your committee as long as the need exists (Middletown Press, November 14, 1930, 1).”

The “prime responsibility upon the individual for the welfare of his neighbor,” that President Hoover spoke of was evident in the committee’s drive for funds. The day after the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment began collecting, a man visited Mayor Bielefield and gave him a 50-dollar bill, enough money to employ a man for five weeks. The donor, who left instructions that his name was not to be divulged, told the mayor, “I know others are much worse off than I am (Middletown Press, November 13, 1930, 1).”

On November 14, 1930, Anna Godwin, who was in charge of the Bureau of Employment, said that just as many skilled workers applied for employment as unskilled workers. Speaking of the mood shown by those seeking work, she said, “In almost every instance these skilled workers have not only expressed themselves as being willing to do hard labor but have been anxious to take that kind of job when they were notified (Middletown Press, November 14, 1930, 1).”

By November 17, 1930, 530 Middletown residents were donating a percentage of their weekly salaries to the unemployed (Middletown Press, November 17, 1930, 1). While hundreds of citizens contributed money to the mayor’s committee, others helped to provide employment. Neal A. Millane donated a ten-acre tract of woodland he owned in Cromwell to be cleared. On
November 18, 1930, Wilcox put 11 unemployed men to work chopping wood on the property. That morning, 50 men reported for work. The committee only had enough money to employ the 11 men they chose to work. When the men learned this, there was a rush for the city truck that transported the workers to Millane’s property. As the Middletown Press reported, “Mr. Wilcox had difficulty in keeping them out (Middletown Press, November 18, 1930, 1).”

However, as contributions to the mayor’s committee picked up, more men were hired. On November 24, 1930, Wilcox put 32 men to work cutting wood on Millane’s property. After the men cut the wood into eight-foot lengths (Middletown Press, November 22, 1930), trucks of the city’s Public Works and Second District Highway departments brought the chopped wood to the almshouse grounds in Middletown where it was cut into stove lengths for free distribution among poor families in Middletown (Middletown Press, November 24, 1930, 1). By December 5, 1930, 100 cords of wood had been taken from Millane’s property (Middletown Press, December 5, 1930, 1).

Although any employment provided by the mayor’s committee helped to relieve the crisis faced by the Charity Department, the fact remained that, by November 21, 1930, the department had expended $16,976.06 for outside poor, $2,976.06 more than allocated in its budget, and the winter had not yet begun (Middletown Press, November 21, 30, 1). Despite the Charity Department’s bleak outlook for the winter of 1930-1931, the situation in Middletown was no different than in towns all over Connecticut. In fact, the Middletown Press reported that, in
late November 1930, Middletown’s Charity Department was in better condition than that of any other city in the state (Middletown Press, November 21, 1930, 1).

During the winter, as Middletown’s Charity Department continued to expend money for the outside poor that it did not have in its budget, an increase in donations to the mayor’s committee eased the burden on the department. Between November 20, 1930 and December 1, 1930, $1,722.93 was donated to the committee. Because of this increase in funds the committee announced that, during the week of December 1, 1930, it would assign work to 100 men (Middletown Press, December 1, 1930, 1).

Despite the committee’s steadily increasing ability to provide temporary work to the unemployed, the demand for work still outweighed the supply by far. An article from the December 1, 1930 issue of the Middletown Press provides a view into Wilcox’s office. On that morning, in response to the announcement of work, about 50 men crowded into that room. The backgrounds of these men varied greatly, but they all had one thing in common. They were all begging Wilcox for the opportunity to chop wood in the cold for three days. The Middletown Press offers us a glimpse into the lives of three of these men. One was the father of a big family, and, although he owned his own home, he had spent the last of his savings since losing his job. Another man had worked steadily for 20 years earning fair wages, owned a car, and now found himself with no money. The third man, who put his savings into a two-family house, was working on reduced time and had a tenant who could not afford to pay rent. In order to pay his taxes, he had to borrow
money from a finance company. The Middletown Press reported, “Against these cases is found the floater who never holds down a job long and is up against it practically all the time. All, however, belong to the common brotherhood and every effort is being made to give work and relief to the sufferers (Middletown Press, December 1, 1930, 1).”

On December 2, 1930, under the direction of the mayor’s committee, 50 men were assigned to work. In addition to cutting wood at Millane’s property, men were also assigned to cut wood at the town farm and lay grading on land south of the Middletown Yacht Club that was being converted into a park. Early that morning, the temperature dipped down to seven degrees. When the men set out for work, the temperature was still far below freezing, only reaching 44 degrees by noon. Wilcox said that the weather provided a good test of whether or not the men would work if given an opportunity. It was a test they passed. Not one man refused to work in the freezing temperatures (Middletown Press, December 2, 1930, 1).

By this time, more than 2,500 people were making weekly contributions to the mayor’s committee, with the committee receiving over $1,000 per week (Middletown Press, December 3, 1930, 1). During the week of December 8, 1930, with this increase in funds, the committee was able to provide 150 men with work. In addition to the jobs they had been assigned the previous week, a few men were sent to the Municipal Field to dig a ditch that carried water from the Farm Hill School property (Middletown Press, December 5, 1930, 1).
The mayor’s committee was becoming a noticable means of relief in Middletown, both on the state and national level. On February 9, 1931, Mayor Bielefield received a lengthy report from President Hoover’s Emergency Committee on Unemployment. The report devoted a considerable amount of space to the method of relief employed in Middletown and praised the work of Mayor Bielefield’s committee (Middletown Press, February 9, 1931, 1). As early as the first week of December 1930, the Middletown Chamber of Commerce received a letter from the secretary of the Naugatuck, Connecticut Chamber of Commerce and another letter from Essex, Connecticut asking details of the committee’s means of raising money and providing work. The same week, the Middletown Chamber of Commerce, at the request of the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment, sent letters to the Sunday editors of newspapers in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Hartford asking if they would publish stories on Middletown’s relief plan (Middletown Press, December 5, 1930, 1). By the time the mayor’s committee discontinued its fund in April 1931, articles that detailed its work appeared in newspapers in these cities as well as in Europe (Middletown Press, April 30, 1931, 1).

On December 5, 1930 the Middletown Press reported, “The plan is working out remarkably well in Middletown, and, if followed in other cities, will tend to relieve materially the situation that exists practically throughout the country (Middletown Press, December 5, 1930, 1).”
This was not entirely true even in Middletown. Without the work provided by the mayor’s committee more men would have been forced to turn to charity, however, the committee was never able to entirely relieve the unemployment crisis in Middletown; its scope was too large before the committee was formed in October 1930. On March 18, 1931, even with the committee on unemployment expending $1,000 per week to provide work, Mayor Bielefield said that the needs of the unemployed in Middletown were urgent. From March 9 to March 14, 1931 the committee employed 105 men and 12 women. The men were employed cutting wood on Wilcox Island Park, spreading stone on streets and roads, delivering 58 loads of split wood to needy families, sawing and splitting wood, carting and loading stone from the Meriden quarry, and cleaning Water Street catch basins while the women were put to work mending clothes for needy children (Middletown Press, March 18, 1931, 1). However, the committee did not have the means to employ enough people for a long enough period of time. On March 18, 1931, Mayor Bielefield said that there were 350 to 400 heads of families in Middletown who had not been regularly employed for a long period. Due to the extremely temporary and sporadic nature of the employment provided by the mayor’s committee, the situation of those who were employed by the committee was not necessarily improved in the long run. As Mayor Bielefield said, “...with only the small amount [of employment] the committee has been able to give them the need today is apparently as acute as ever and, in some cases, more desperate than before (Middletown Press, December 18, 1931, 1).”
The winter of 1930-1931 was a difficult one across the country. In January 1931, President Hoover reported that there were 2.5 million unemployed nationally. It was not until April 1931 that the Secretary of Commerce admitted the number had actually been 6 million in January (Warren 132). On December 2, 1930, in his message to Congress, President Hoover said that, “each community and each State should assume its full responsibility for organization of employment and relief of distress with that sturdiness and independence which built a great Nation (Warren 193).

On a small scale, state aid for some of Middletown’s unemployed was available as early as January 1931, at which point the state hired unemployed men to thin out undesirable growth in state forests and cut fire lines to aid in the protection of the forests from fire. On January 7, 1931, 18 men were put to work at Cockaponsett State Forest in Haddam, Connecticut, 12 from Middletown and six from Haddam. Like the mayor’s committee, the state paid the workers 40 cents per hour. While the mayor’s committee only provided 24 hours of work per week, the state hired men to work in the state forests 40 hours per week (Middletown Press, March 19, 1931, 1). An appropriation of $100,000 passed by the General Assembly gave work to about 400 men in Connecticut state forests, including the 12 from Middletown (Middletown Press, February 7, 1931, 1).

At this point, however, organization of employment and relief of distress in Middletown was almost entirely on the local level. While 600 registered with Middletown’s Bureau of Employment during the first six months it was in
operation, representing 2,300 dependents or nearly one-tenth of Middletown’s
general population, the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment was able to
provide work for 400 of these 600 men (Annual Report, April 30, 1931, 6). The
strain on the Charity Department was relieved to a degree by both the work
provided these men as well as the wood that was cut under the direction of the
mayor’s committee. Hundreds of cords of wood cut by the unemployed at the
Cockaponsett State Forest in Haddam, at Wilcox Island Park in Middletown, and
on the Millane property in Cromwell were distributed to needy families in
Middletown. Without this assistance, Wilcox said that the Charity Department
would have needed to provide coal to these families. He estimated that the
mayor’s committee saved the department $3,000 on coal alone (Middletown Press,
April 10, 1931, 1).

The mayor’s committee ended its work on April 30, 1931, the last day of
the 1930-1931 fiscal year. Since November 20, 1930, contributions from more
than 2,500 citizens of Middletown amounted to $23,000, and this money was used
to employ nearly 500 men and women. The committee’s final weekly payroll was
$1,800 (Middletown Press, April 30, 1931, 1). On the day the committee ceased to
function, the Middletown Press reported, “But for the support given the mayor’s
committee the city would have been obliged to give relief to the sufferers. There
can be no doubt that if all assistance had been rendered by the Charity
Department, more than $23,000 would have come from the taxpayers as it would
have been impossible to check up on every application for assistance (Middletown
Press, April 30, 1931, 1). The Middletown Press called the mayor's committee, “one of the crowning achievements in Middletown’s history (Middletown Press, April 30, 1931, 1).”

Despite the money that the mayor’s committee saved the Charity Department, and, therefore, the taxpayers, unemployment caused the city to go into debt as early as January 1931. Some $14,000 had been allocated in the 1930-1931 budget for the Charity Department’s outside poor account. By the time the fiscal year ended on April 30, 1931, the department had expended more than twice that amount, $30,531.35, to relieve the unemployed (Annual Report, April 30, 1931, 48). Despite the more than $16,000 deficit in the Charity Department, the city’s annual finance report states that, “Rigid economy was practiced in all departments to the end that the actual deficit in the entire second district was reduced to less than $6,000.00 (Annual Report, April 30, 1931, 12).” In January 1931, the Board of Apportionment and Taxation provided a $10,000 deficiency appropriation for the new 1931-1932 city budget. The deficit was to be raised by taxation during the 1931-32 fiscal year. With this appropriation, the city entered the fiscal year with a balance of nearly $4,000 (Annual Report, April 30, 1931, 12).

With the help of the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment, Middletown had gotten through the 1930-1931 fiscal year with only a $10,000 burden on the taxpayers. The situation, however, only went downhill from there. With a $10,000 deficiency left over from the 1930-1931 fiscal year, a year in which more demands
were made on the Charity Department than ever before, the department was allotted $25,000 for outside poor in the 1931-1932 budget, $5,531.35 less than the amount expended the previous year (Annual Report, April 30, 1931, 51). In May 1931, the Charity Department was paying the rents of 70 families, more than ever before, and was expending $800 per week for the outside poor, only $200 per week less than during the winter months (Middletown Press, May 26, 1931, 1).

Meanwhile, the unemployed continued to come to Wilcox in search of work. On May 25, 1931 alone he received 35 applications. Since the mayor’s committee had ceased to function, Wilcox had no work to offer them (Middletown Press, May 26, 1931, 1). Although there was an increase in employment in Middletown between the winter of 1930-1931 and the summer of 1931, the termination of the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment’s fund caused requests for assistance from the Charity Department to climb. By mid-July 1931, with 22 new applications for charity coming in during the month of July alone (Wilcox, July 1931), the department was expending more money for charity than during the winter months. With about 150 families receiving help from the city, the largest number in the history of the Charity Department, Wilcox realized that his $25,000 budget for outside poor would be exhausted before May if conditions did not improve (Middletown Press, July 15, 1931, 1).

The Charity Board, comprised of Common Councilmen George B. Gilbert, chairman, Charles T. Davis, and George C. Zeeb, decided that all male applicants would have to work in exchange for the fuel, grocery, and rent orders they receive
from the Charity Department. Middletown was the first city in the state to try the new plan. The Middletown Press reported, “The Charity Board will assume that if applications fall off because work is required, many now asking for help are not in dire straights (Middletown Press, July 13, 1931),” and wrote that the board expected applications for rent and groceries to decrease if men had to work in exchange for them.

Instead of experiencing a fall off in applications for charity, the number of applications increased, and not one man refused to work (Middletown Press, July 28, 1931, 1).

On July 20, 1931, under Wilcox’s direction, a gang of 16 men were given work grading East Street in exchange for rent and grocery vouchers from the Charity Department (Middletown Press, July 15, 1931, 1). They were willing to work under any conditions. Some of them only owned one pair of shoes. Since they could not afford to ruin their only pair of shoes while working on the roads, some of them went barefoot when at work. The Family Welfare Association began a clothing drive on August 31, 1931 and Wilcox notified them of the need for mens shoes (Middletown Press, August 15, 1931, 1).

The summer had been a difficult one for the Charity Department. Realizing the need for a new relief plan in Middletown, Mayor Bielefield sent a letter to about 150 merchants and citizens on September 22, 1931 inviting them to attend a conference to be held in City Chambers on September 25, a Friday, at 2 P.M. to discuss the unemployment situation. In the letter, he wrote that many seeking work
from the Charity Department would become wards of the city if work could not be obtained for them (Middletown Press, September 22, 1931, 1). By September 26, 1931, with the department employing 120 men part-time to do roadwork in exchange for relief, the appropriations for highway construction were nearly exhausted (Middletown Press, September 26, 1931, 1).

Without a fund for the unemployed, like the one that had existed the previous winter, the Charity Department simply could not afford to provide enough work. Mayor Bielefeld called the September 25, 1931 conference in response to a discouraging meeting held between the Charity Board of the Common Council and the manufacturers of Middletown on September 18, 1931. The local manufacturers and employers of labor could offer no promises that they would be able to relieve the unemployment situation in Middletown. In regard to the meeting, Mayor Bielefeld wrote in his letter to the citizens of Middletown, “It was clearly evident that unless some immediate step be taken to relieve the situation, acute distress will result (Middletown Press, September 22, 1931, 1).” At the meeting on September 18, 1931, Mayor Bielefeld had said that a fund of at least $35,000 would be needed to prevent suffering in Middletown during the approaching winter. Wilcox had advised him that the goal should be $50,000 (Middletown Press, September 26, 1931, 1).

The manufacturers of Middletown were not able to relieve the unemployment situation. In his annual financial statement, Mayor Bielefeld would write that the 1931-1932 fiscal year, “...presented some of the most trying
and perplexing problems in our history, with industry paralyzed and hundreds unable to earn even a loaf of bread, nearly 4,000 dependents were thrust upon this administration with a duty incumbent upon it to find shelter, food, fuel, and clothing to prevent suffering and distress (Annual Report, April 30, 1932, 11).

The situation would have been far worse if Mayor Bielefield had not taken the "immediate step" that he called for in his letter of September 22, 1931. At the meeting on September 25, 1931, Mayor Bielefield stated that the city needed to give relief in order to prevent suffering during the winter. He pointed out that several cities in Connecticut had already started drives for funds and made relief plans. In New Britain, unemployed heads of families received weekly a basket of food from the city's Municipal Store (Middletown Press, September 26, 1931, 1).

Middletown did not believe in such a policy. Since July 1931, all male applicants for charity had been required to do roadwork in exchange for rent, food, and a small amount of money. Like the previous winter, the city administration was set on providing relief for the unemployed during the winter of 1931-1932 by giving them work instead of a dole. At the September 25, 1931 meeting Mayor Bielefield said, "The dole breaks down the moral fibre of citizens and makes them beggars and paupers (Middletown Press, September 26, 1931, 1)."

At the meeting, it was proposed that the mayor appoint another committee on unemployment. The committee would seek voluntary weekly contributions from workers' wages, as it had done the previous winter. Some thought this method was no longer feasible as the unemployment situation in Middletown was
more serious than it had been the previous winter; by September 1931, only about half of those employed in Middletown worked full time. A number of manufacturers felt that those working part time would not be willing to donate a percentage of their weekly wages to the unemployed (Middletown Press, September 26, 1931, 1).

The only decision made at the meeting on September 25, 1931 was a vote by the Common Council that Mayor Bielefield be empowered to name a committee to work out a relief program for the winter (Middletown Press, September 26, 1931, 1). The 11 member committee consisted of James H. Bunce, president of the James H. Bunce Company; Channing E. Harwood, superintendent of the Russell Manufacturing Company; Susan I. Miller, treasurer of W.S. Miller, Inc.; Dr. Roy L. Leak, superintendent of the Connecticut State Hospital; Burr E. Stevens, president of the Middletown Press Publishing Company; Russell E. Benner, factory manager of the Remington Noiseless Typewriter Corporation; Joseph P. Kinsella, druggist; A. J. Geib, manager of J.C. Penny Company, Inc.; Earl R. Hudson, treasurer of the Middletown Savings Bank; Professor Kossuth M. Williamson, member of the Wesleyan University faculty; and Eleanor G. Acheson (Middletown Press, September 29, 1931, 1). Eleanor Acheson’s husband, Edward Campion Acheson, was the eighteenth rector of Middletown’s Church of the Holy Trinity from 1892-1915 and later served as the sixth Bishop of Connecticut. Their son, Dean Acheson, was Secretary of State under President Harry S Truman (Richter 138).
A week after their appointment by Mayor Bieelefield, this committee met with him and voted to recommend that a body of citizens be selected to arrange for the voluntary payment by the employed of Middletown of a percentage of their wages to an unemployment fund. A resolution passed unanimously calling for voluntary payment of one percent of the weekly wages of those earning from $15 to $30 a week, one and one half percent of the wages of those earning $30 to $60 a week, and two percent of the wages of those earning $60 a week and over (Middletown Press, October 3, 1931, 1).

The same month, Mayor Bieelefield selected a body of 50 citizens, his committee on unemployment, to arrange for this voluntary payment (Annual Report, April 30, 1932, 7). The committee’s goal was to raise $50,000, the amount of money Wilcox said would be needed to relieve suffering in Middletown during the winter of 1931-1932. Mayor Bieelefield continued to support local relief efforts. In fact, he believed so strongly in the local committee method of raising funds for the unemployed that he brushed off the idea of federal relief when it reached Middletown. In November 1931, as Middletown was intensifying its local relief efforts, Mayor Bieelefield received a letter from Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr. of Wisconsin, chairman of the committee on manufacturers. In it, La Follette wrote, “It has come to my attention that many municipalities, due to continued unemployment and the general business depression, are finding it necessary still further to increase their outlays for relief purposes this winter (Middletown Press, November 28, 1931, 1).” This was certainly the case in Middletown. In order to
relieve suffering in the city during the winter of 1931-1932, the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment needed to raise more than twice the amount it had collected the previous winter.

The letter also said that some members of the senate felt that the federal government should assist the states and municipalities in meeting part of the increased burden caused by unemployment (Middletown Press, November 28, 1931, 1). Mayor Bielefield sent La Follette a brief reply in which he wrote, “Middletown does not believe in governmental paternalism (Middletown Press, November 28, 1931, 1).”

In the Congress that met several days later, there was considerable support for federal aid. La Follette and senator Edward P. Costigan of Colorado introduced bills providing for federal aid, bills that were consolidated in January 1932 into one measure asking for $375 million dollars to supplement state efforts. At that point, the majority of senators shared Mayor Bielefield’s opposition to federal relief; the bill was defeated on February 16, 1932 by a vote of 35 to 48 (Warren 203). In a national context, Mayor Bielefield, as a Democrat from the North, was atypical in his opposition to federal relief. Of the 18 Democrats who voted in favor of the La Follette Costigan Bill, 11 were from the North while only eight of the 21 Democrats who voted against the bill were Northerners (Warren 203).

In a local context, however, it is understandable that the mayor of Middletown did not feel a need for federal assistance in November 1931. Although Wilcox estimated that there would be 800 unemployed in Middletown
before the winter of 1931-1932 ended (Middletown Press, November 28, 1931, 1), unemployment in Middletown had not yet skyrocketed. It did soon after. Between November 28, 1931, the day Mayor Bielefeld took a stance against “governmental paternalism,” and February 24, 1932 alone, the number of unemployed registered at the Municipal Employment Office had increased from 629 to 1,012 (Middletown Press, February 24, 1932). It was only then that the need for state and federal relief would become more apparent.

However, in October 1931, before this surge in unemployment, the urgent need caused by unemployment in Middletown could be tided over with $50,000 (Middletown Press, September 26, 1931, 1). After all, that was twice the amount of money the Charity Department had been allotted for its outside poor account for the 1931-1932 fiscal year. On October 27, 1931, the committee began its campaign to raise $50,000. On that day alone $5,000 was donated, $3,000 of which came from Colonel Clarence S. Wadsworth and his wife, who was a member of the mayor’s committee (Middletown Press, October 27, 1931, 1). By the next day, the committee had raised $7,949, with contributions including a $1,000 donation from Bishop Acheson and his wife, Eleanor Acheson, who was a member of the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment (Middletown Press, October 28, 1931, 1). The response to the committee’s drive for funds was remarkable. The previous year, it had taken the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment six months to raise $23,000, just less than three times the amount raised by the mayor’s new committee in only a two-day period.

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On November 2, 1931, less than a week after the committee’s drive for donations began, the mayor’s committee voted to appropriate $1,000 to be used that week to employ men and women who had been out of work for months (Middletown Press, November 2, 1931, 1).

At that point, unemployed men registered for work at the Municipal Employment Office, located behind City Hall, while women registered at the office of the Family Welfare Association. On November 16, 1931, the number of men registered at the office reached 578 while 137 women had registered for work. On the same date, the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment voted to expend $1,500 a week for labor, $1,350 to employ 128 men during the week of November 16, 1931 and $150 to employ 18 women during the same period of time (Middletown Press, November 16, 1931, 1).

As the month of November 1931 came to a close, the committee’s drive for donations intensified. By November 28, nearly $39,000 had been pledged to the mayor’s committee (Middletown Press, November 28, 31, 1). While the four figure donations made by Wadsworth and Acheson, two prominent Middletown residents, made up over ten percent of this amount, much of the money was donated by wage earners who were not much better off than those they were aiding. It is the contributions made by less prominent people that give a sense of the sacrifice Middletown residents of all walks of life made in order to aid the unemployed. This included people who had been labeled juvenile delinquents by society. On November 28, 1931, Samuel S. Mattes, chairman of the Mayor’s
Committee on Unemployment, received two cheques from Caroline Penniman, superintendent of Long Lane Farm, an institution of reform for girls. One check, for $161.50, was from the employees of Long Lane Farm. The other one, made out for $16.42, came from contributions made by the girls of Long Lane Farm. Penniman wrote, “...In giving it the girls have really made quite a personal sacrifice. Some of them have worked for this money here, and many of them have relatives who have no employment (Middletown Press, November 28, 1931, 1).”

During the same week in which the checks were received from Long Lane Farm, the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment continued to draw attention to its fund by hanging hand-painted posters in local factories. One pictured a ragged, emaciated child with the caption, “Give this kid a chance,” while the other showed a drawing of Abraham Lincoln with the words, “Sacrifice. Help the jobless (Middletown Press, November 28, 1931, 1).”

The committee's drive for donations was successful. By December 21, 1931, with nearly $44,000 pledged to the fund, the committee was able to provide work for 150 men during a one-week period, more than had been employed at any one time since the fund was created in October 1931 (Middletown Press, December 21, 1931). The following week, 120 men were given work (Middletown Press, December 26, 1931, 1). By February 18, 1932, $48,600 had been pledged to the fund (Middletown Press, February 18, 1932, 1). This is not to say, however, that unemployment caused no suffering in Middletown during the winter of 1931-1932. The Charity Department was still overburdened by the needs of the
unemployed. During the 1931-1932 fiscal year, the department not only exhausted its $25,000 outside poor fund, but also expended an additional $22,455.52 on food, fuel, and rent vouchers (Annual report, April 30, 1932, 51).

The winter was the most demanding time for the Charity Department. On February 24, 1932, as the temperature dropped down to eight degrees at night, the Middletown Press reported that, from morning until night, "Mr. Wilcox receives a steady stream of unemployed men who tell him their troubles and ask for fuel, clothing, shoes, rent, and food (Middletown Press, February 24, 1932, 1)." On February 24, 1932 alone, six persons who applied for relief showed Wilcox eviction notices due to non-payment of rent (Middletown Press, February 24, 1932, 1). Although the funds donated to the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment employed anywhere from 40 to 168 men at any given time during the winter of 1931-1932 (Middletown Press, January 6, 1932, 1), a steadily increasing amount of people turned to the Charity Department for aid. During the month of January 1932, 57 new applications for aid were received by the department, (Wilcox, January 1932), 24 more than had been received the previous month (Wilcox, December 1931). Of the 57 applications received in January 1932, only 20 were accepted (Wilcox, January 1932).

Now, more than 70 years after these people went to the Charity Department in a desperate attempt to keep their children fed and warm, their fate has been reduced to one of two words typed on a faded, long-forgotten Charity Department report: "accepted," or "denied." Joseph Salafia, a life-long Middletown resident
who is now 76, remembers the days when an acceptance or a denial from Wilcox was the difference between a full stomach and an empty one, a cold bed and a warm one.

His family did not want to be at the mercy of the Charity Department. In fact, Mr. Salafia said that his father, Michele (Mike) Salafia, the son of Sicilian-American immigrants, would rather starve than go to the city for assistance (Salafia, November 30, 2002).

Mr. Salafia’s mother, Concettina Salafia, however, swallowed her pride and went to Wilcox’s office out of necessity. The experience was humiliating and invasive. Mr. Salafia, who sometimes accompanied his mother during her visits to the Charity Department, claimed that Wilcox would make remarks like, “You don’t look like you’re hungry” (Salafia, November 30, 2002).” Then came the questions. “Do you have a bank account? Does your husband work? Where? How much does he make?” The right answers meant fuel and food, the wrong answer meant cold and hunger. Mr. Salafia said, “If Wilcox said you got oil, you got oil. If he said you didn’t get oil, you didn’t get oil. He was God (Salafia, November 30, 2002).” Mr. Salafia’s mother was one of the lucky ones. She was given vouchers for oil to keep her family’s stove burning and for groceries. However, Mr. Salafia said, “If you needed 15 dollars a week to survive they’d give you 10, and you could do nothing about it (Salafia, November 30, 2002).”

After 70 years, Mr. Salafia still remembers his mother begging
for oil. He said, “It’s not pleasant seeing your mother cry over stuff like that
(Salafia, November 30, 2002).”

Concettina was not the only one crying over the thought of where her
childrens’ next meal would come from or how she would heat her home; 1,063
unemployed men and women, along with their thousands of dependents, shared
her dilemma. On March 25, 1932, unemployment in Middletown reached its peak,
with 1,063 unemployed registered at the Municipal Employment Office. The
number of unemployed had nearly doubled since the previous winter, at which
point 552 had been registered at the office (Middletown Press, March 25, 1932, 1).

For these 1,063 men and their families, the winter of 1931-1932 was full of
tears and anxiety. One of the best accounts of everyday life during this period
comes from an unlikely source, the annual report of the Russell Library’s librarian,
Nathaly E. Newton, for the fiscal year beginning on May 1, 1932. In this report we
learn that, understandably, those feeling the effects of the Depression looked to
escape their suffering any way possible. When they could no longer afford a ticket
to the movies, they turned to one of the few places where they could find free
solace from their harsh realities. In the report, Newton wrote, “…In these days of
financial worries, it is no uncommon thing for a boy or girl to come in asking the
librarian to select two or three detective shockers or the wildest and wooliest
Westerns on the shelves to help Dad to forget his worries so that he may be able to
sleep at night (Annual report, April 30, 1933, 133).”
Newton also wrote in the report that the library's greatest responsibility is toward, "those who have been hardest hit; those who yesterday gave their share in helping others, and are today themselves receiving aid. For many of these the public library is their only source of recreation. It offers them a welcome and a chance to forget their troubles. Through books it can help them to keep their courage and self-respect lest discouragement and bitterness overwhelm them (Annual report, April 30, 1933, 133)."

As the number of wage earners in Middletown who, "yesterday gave their share in helping others, and are today themselves receiving aid," steadily increased, contributions to the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment's fund dropped off. On March 25, 1932, the same day the Middletown Press reported that unemployment in Middletown had peaked, it also reported, "Only a skeleton crew has been employed by the mayor's committee this week as the funds are low (Middletown Press, March 25, 1932, 1)." By May 2, 1932, the committee could only appropriate $500.00 to provide work for men and women during the following week, the smallest weekly appropriation made by the committee since it began providing work on November 2, 1931 (Middletown Press, May 2, 1932, 1). The average weekly appropriation for labor had been $1,372.09 (Mattes, June 6, 1932).

In his report on the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment, presented to the Common Council at its regular meeting on June 6, 1932, Chairman Samuel S. Mattes reported that the committee stopped providing relief work on May 28,
1932 due to a lack of contributions to the committee’s fund (Mattes, June 6, 1932). By the time it discontinued its drive for funds on May 28, 1932, the committee had raised $46,776 in contributions and the voluntary weekly subscriptions of wage earners (Annual Report, April 30, 1933, 8), totaling more than twice the amount collected by the committee the previous winter and only $3,224 less than the committee’s goal for the 1931-1932 collection.

By May 1932, even $46,776 could not provide temporary work for all the unemployed in Middletown. By this time, 1,300 unemployed men and 300 women had registered for work. Investigation showed that these 1,600 unemployed men and women represented approximately 4,000 dependents, nearly one-sixth of the general population of Middletown, who were in need of aid (Annual Report, April 30, 1933, 8). Through the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment, nearly $42,000 of the money donated to the committee was expended to provide temporary work for 868 men and 77 women between November 1931 and May 1932 (Annual Report, April 30, 1933, 8).

Although the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment had not solved the problems caused by unemployment in Middletown, it had done a great deal to bandage them. It is because of the $46,776 raised by this committee that 868 of the 1,300 men who applied for work at the Municipal Employment Office between November 1, 1931 and May 28, 1932 were able to obtain it on a temporary basis.

Granted the work provided by the committee had its drawbacks. It was not sufficient to provide work for all the city’s unemployed or guarantee employment
for more than two to four days at a time. However, the fact remains that this employment was made possible by private donations rather than city funds. When these donations dried up and the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment stopped providing work, the unemployed had nowhere to turn but the Charity Department, and, therefore, the city’s treasury. Before long, this had a serious effect on the city’s finances and sent its administration scrambling for a solution to the unemployment problem.

By May 1, 1932, the day the budget for the 1932-1933 fiscal year took effect, the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment knew that its fund would cease to function by the end of the month (Middletown Press, May 2, 1932, 1). Therefore, going into the 1932-1933 fiscal year, Wilcox knew that relief for the unemployed would fall entirely on his department’s budget. The Charity Department was already providing relief to 379 families (Annual Report, May 30, 1933, 124), including rent payments for 150 families (Middletown Press, May 17, 1932, 1). In preparing the city’s budget for the 1931-1932 fiscal year, city officials had managed to actually reduce the tax rate, however, this reduction came at a cost. As the Middletown Press reported on May 2, 1932, the new budget was, “pared to the bone (Middletown Press, May 2, 1932, 1).” In an economy program sponsored by the Taxpayers’ Committee, a $60,000 appropriation for new street construction was slashed from the budget, and only $29,000 was appropriated for general street repairs (Middletown Press, May 2, 1932, 1).
The Charity Department’s budget fared a little better than it had during the 1931-1932 fiscal year. It’s outside poor account for the 1932-1933 fiscal year was $30,000, up $5,000 from the previous year’s appropriation. An additional $5,000 was transferred from the city’s bridge account to be used for outside poor (Middletown Press, June 27, 1932, 1).

This $5,000 and many additional thousands of dollars were greatly needed by the Charity Department. By May 4, 1932, the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment only received enough donations to employ three men, one of whom was hired by Mayor Bielefied to work on his Russell Street property (Middletown Press, May 4, 1932, 1). On May 17, 1932, with the fund of the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment nearly exhausted, the Municipal Employment Office was no longer providing employment. Without any source of work, the Middletown Press reported, “Now idle workers are invading Mr. Wilcox’s office in the City Hall and demanding personal interviews (Middletown Press, May 17, 1932, 1).” By 10 o’clock that morning, 75 men had asked Wilcox for work. He said, “I can’t promise these men anything (Middletown Press, May 17, 1932, 1).”

Wilcox knew that the Charity Department’s $30,000 outside poor account would not be enough to provide adequate relief to the 379 families already dependent upon the department, let alone the many more that he knew would need aid once the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment stopped providing work. During the first months of 1932, the number of new applicants for charity hovered
around 50 per month. However, the inevitable soon happened. In June 1932, the number of new applicants for aid jumped to 172 (Wilcox, June 1932). On June 27, 1932, the Middletown Press reported that 900 heads of families were now going to the Charity Department seeking work (Middletown Press, June 27, 1932, 1). At that time, less than two months into the fiscal year, Wilcox knew that the Charity Department’s $30,000 outside poor account would be exhausted by September 1 (Middletown Press, June 27, 1932, 1).

Instead of giving out a dole, Wilcox began a works relief program in which his department provided work for all male applicants in exchange for relief. Of the 900 men who came to Wilcox for work in June 1932, he only had the funds to employ 250 of them. These men were given jobs doing roadwork on two and three-day shifts in exchange for aid (Middletown Press, June 27, 1932, 1). Wilcox stressed the need for the Charity Department to give work, saying, “The men who are employed would otherwise be objects of charity. The city benefits by their labors as highways are being improved (Middletown Press, June 27, 1932, 1).” By August 12, 1932, the Charity Department was expending $1,750.04 a week to provide work for unemployed men, nearly $400 more than the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment’s average weekly payroll had been (Middletown Press, August 12, 1932, 1). The difference was that, unlike work funded by donations to the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment, the Charity Department’s payroll came directly out of the city’s funds. During the week of October 8, 1932, the Charity Department paid 335 men $1,757.15 to do roadwork (Middletown
Press, October 14, 1932, 1). Since the Charity Department’s outside poor account had been exhausted by this time, the department was using funds from the Highway Department, of which Wilcox was also superintendent, and the other accounts of the Charity Department to provide the unemployed with work (Middletown Press, October 24, 1932, 1). By mid-November 1932, in addition to public funds, the funds from the highway and bridge appropriations transferred to the Charity Department had also been expended for relief. With about 1,400 Middletown residents unemployed (Middletown Press, November 17, 1932, 1) and practically no city funds left to assist them, the work relief provided by the Charity Department created a huge deficit in the department’s budget.

The situation only worsened. On December 31, 1932, the number of unemployed registered at the Municipal Employment Office was 1,490. The previous New Year’s Eve, the number had been 750, almost exactly half that amount (Middletown Press, January 2, 1933, 5). By January 2, 1933 the Charity Department was, on a weekly basis, employing 350 men and distributing about 400 vouchers for groceries (Middletown Press, January 2, 1933, 5). In addition to these food orders, which totaled about $4,000 per month, the Charity Department was paying the rents of needy families at a cost of $3,500 per month (Middletown Press, January 6, 1933, 1), and paid $2,184.80 to employ 343 men during the week of January 9, 1933 alone, the second largest weekly payroll since the Charity Department assumed the entire burden of the care for the unemployed in May 1932 (Middletown Press, January 13, 1933).
By late January 1933, the situation was bleaker than ever before. During the week of January 16, the Charity Department spent $2,182.40 to employ 347 workers (Middletown Press, January 23, 1933, 1). At the same time, Wilcox estimated that 2,500 men and women in Middletown were unemployed, more than one-tenth of the general population. The number of unemployed registered at the Municipal Employment Office was 1,600, twice the amount registered the previous January, and was slowly increasing (Middletown Press, January 21, 1933, 1). Although the Charity Department’s budget had been exhausted nearly five months earlier, the department continued to spend $8,000 a month to provide work for the unemployed, and, in addition, was paying the rents of 300 families (Middletown Press, January 21, 1933, 1).

On February 16, 1933 Wilcox went before the Board of Apportionment and Taxation and asked for a total appropriation of $209,175 for the Charity Department, nearly one-half of which would be used to make up a deficiency caused by the work relief given by the department. It was more than the city administration could cope with. Councilman Lewis B. Daniels said, “Can’t we skip this page?” Councilman Thomas E. Reilly said, “No, let’s tear it out altogether,” and Mayor Bielefield said, “I will be glad to entertain a motion to that effect (Middletown Press, February 16, 1933, 1).”

By the time the 1932-1933 fiscal year ended on April 30, 1933, the Charity Department had spent $204,485.51, some $138,410.51 more than department’s appropriation at the beginning of the fiscal year (Annual Report, April 30, 1933,
60. Of this amount, $167,710.06 was spent for the aid of outside poor, 
$132,710.06 more than the $30,000 that had been appropriated for the outside 
poor account at the beginning of the 1932-1933 fiscal year. The pay given by the 
Charity Department in exchange for work accounted for $78,107 of the outside 
poor expenditure (Annual Report, April 30, 1933, 126), and while 379 families 
received aid from the Charity Department at the beginning of the 1932-1933 fiscal 
year, that number had increased to 776 families by the year’s end (Annual Report, 
April 30, 1933, 124).

The city entered the 1933-1934 fiscal year with a $125,000 deficit in the 
Charity Department. During the first week of the new fiscal year this amount was 
borrowed by the city on short term notes which were eventually discharged 
through a bond issue. As the Middletown Press reported on April 11, 1933, “In the 
last analysis, the unemployment problem must be met by the taxpayers 
(Middletown Press, April 11, 1933, 1).”

The demand for relief during the 1932-1933 fiscal year cost the Charity 
Department three times more than it had the year before, cost the taxpayers of 
Middletown $125,000, and drastically changed the way the city’s administration 
viewed the federal government’s role in providing relief to the citizens of 
Middletown.

In April 1933, just a year and a half after Mayor Bielefield had written that 
Middletown did not believe in “governmental paternalism,” in his letter to Senator 
La Follette, the mayor jumped at the opportunity to secure federally funded jobs
for the city’s unemployed. On April 13, 1933, Mayor Bielefield and Wilcox went
to New Haven to confer with James W. Hook, chairman of the State
Unemployment Commission, about a Federal reforestation program that provided
jobs for 250,000 men nationwide. Based on its population, the quota for
Middletown was 45 men. These men received $30.00 in cash per month for six
months from the federal government in exchange for cutting out “unproductive
timber” and making wood tracts. Therefore, over a six month period,
Middletown’s participation in the reforestation program saved Middletown’s
Charity Department an estimated $13,000 that would have otherwise been spent to
provide work locally for these 45 men (Middletown Press, April 14, 1933, 1).

In August 1933, the Charity Department was again relieved by the federal
government. On August 17, City Treasurer Charles A. Chafee received a check for
$12,351.45, Middletown’s share of a federal grant for welfare work (Middletown
Press, August 17, 1933, 1). This check, however, was a one-time gift. It was not
until November 1933 that Middletown would be directly benefited by a federal
relief program.

This program was the Civil Works Administration (CWA). It had been
approved by President Franklin Roosevelt on November 2, 1933, and, by
November 23, the CWA was paying its first cheques to 814,511 workers. By
Christmas 3.5 million were employed nationwide, and by January 1, 1934 the
workforce totalled 4.2 million (Badger 197).
The CWA was an unparalleled source of relief in Middletown. During the week of December 27, 1933, at least 665 Middletown residents were on the CWA’s payroll, 130 more than Middletown’s regular quota determined by the CWA (Middletown Press, December 28, 1933, 1).

The CWA was so effective in Middletown, in part, because its local CWA committee acted with great speed when projects were submitted to its members (Middletown Press, December 28, 1933). When the CWA took effect in Middletown, all of the unemployed who had been hired by the Charity Department’s work relief program were given employment by the CWA, taking a tremendous burden off the department. Under the CWA, Roaring Brook Storage Reservoir was completed at Mount Higby Reservoir, providing an adequate water supply to Middletown for years to come, the Russell Library’s roof was repaired, a permanent white line was painted on Main Street, construction of the Newfield Heights Sewerage System was about two-thirds completed, and Chamberlain Hill Road was widened and graded, among other projects. Also, the CWA employed men to raise and grade the Municipal Field and do extensive maintenance and improvement work at the Woodrow Wilson High School, including the complete painting of the school and the laying of an additional 263 feet of sidewalk to connect the school with Russell Street (Annual Report, April 30, 1934).

In Middletown, as many as 833 workers were on the CWA payroll during one week (Annual Report, April 30, 1934, 125). In a matter of weeks, aid from the federal government had accomplished what local relief could not do during three
years of sacrifice and strain on the part of the local government; the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment had never been able to hire more than 168 men in one week. Under the Charity Department’s work relief program of 1932-1933, a maximum of only 350 men were employed in one week, and the wages of these men were a direct burden on the taxpayers of Middletown.

Although the CWA was terminated by President Roosevelt on March 31, 1934 due to a lack of funding (Badger 200), federally funded employment continued in Middletown a year later under the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Never again would the city’s Charity Department be left on its own to contend with the effects of the Depression. After three years and a more than $125,000 deficit in the city’s budget due to unemployment, Middletown, like cities across the country, realized that local efforts alone could not relieve the suffering of its citizens.
Epilogue

This is by no means a thorough discussion of Middletown, Connecticut during the Great Depression. My intention was to focus on the local system of relief in place here during the first three years of the Great Depression, and, in doing so, demonstrate why Federal relief was so welcomed and necessary in Middletown by the winter of 1933. Therefore, my essay does not discuss in detail the Federal relief that later existed in Middletown under the Civil Works Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the Works Progress Administration. I would like to see someone else pick up research in 1933, where my story leaves off. Together, our research would paint a more complete picture of Middletown, and the nation as a whole, during the Great Depression.

In addition, my essay does not discuss every method of relief that existed in Middletown during the first three years of the Great Depression. In focusing on the course of relief taken by the city government, I averted my attention from other sources of aid for the unemployed that existed during this time. Most noteworthy is the Family Welfare Association, an association that assisted the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment and raised thousands of dollars to benefit the needy. There is little doubt that an entire essay can be devoted to the history of this association and the role it played during the Great Depression.
Finally, if I had had more time to devote to this project, I would have made it a point to conduct more interviews and incorporate them into my essay. The survivors of the Great Depression that I did interview, men and women now in their seventies and eighties, provided me with a fascinating glimpse into a world that I can only read about on a roll of microfilm or in a Charity Department report. In trying to describe the lack of employment that existed during the Great Depression, Joseph Salafia said to me, “There was nothing. No one knows unless they lived through something like that.”

I will never know what it was like to live through the Great Depression, however, I feel fortunate that I have had the opportunity to speak with those who do. I realize that this opportunity will become more and more rare as the years pass. Therefore, I recommend that oral histories of those who recall the Great Depression be conducted in Middletown as well as in cities across the nation. If I were to re-write this essay, I would focus less on newspaper accounts and more on the testimonies of those who recall Depression-era Middletown. However, with a subject as rich, complicated, and, above all, well-documented as the Great Depression, there will always be more avenues that one can research. For me, the greatest challenge was not in finding research materials, but rather in choosing which avenue of research to follow.
Appendix A: Timeline

October 29, 1929- Stock market crashes

January 29, 1930- The Charity Department’s Outside Poor Account shows an increase of $1,200 over the previous year

July 1, 1930- 101 are receiving aid from the Charity Department, more than ever before in the city’s history

October 29, 1930- The directors of the Middletown Chamber of Commerce suggest that Mayor Bielefield appoint a citizens’ committee to develop a local relief plan

November 3, 1930- Middletown’s Bureau of Employment opens in the Municipal Building, 131 register for work on November 3 alone

November 12, 1930- The Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment proposes that Middletown residents donate money to provide work for the unemployed; the committee estimates that 500 Middletown residents are unemployed, 360 of whom had registered with the Bureau of Employment

April 30, 1931- After nearly six months, the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment ends its drive for funds after raising $23,000 in contributions, responsibility for relief again falls entirely on the Charity Department

July 15, 1931- 150 families are receiving aid from the Charity Department

September 25, 1931- The Common Council votes that Mayor Bielefield be empowered to name an 11-member committee to work out a relief program for the winter of 1931-1932

October 27, 1931- The second Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment seeks donations in order to provide work for the unemployed, goal is set at $50,000

February 24, 1932- 1,063 unemployed are registered at the Municipal Employment Office

May 28, 1932- The second Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment discontinues its drive for funds due to a lack of contributions, raised $46,776 in contributions and the voluntary weekly subscriptions of wage earners and provided part-time
employment to 945 unemployed men and women. The responsibility for relief again falls entirely on the Charity Department.

**June 27, 1932** - 900 heads of families seek work from the Charity Department.

**January 21, 1933** - Unemployment in Middletown reaches its peak with an estimated 2,500 people, more than 10 percent of the general population, unemployed. Some 1,600 are registered at the Municipal Employment Office.

**January 1933** - The Charity Departments spends over $2,000 per week to provide work relief to unemployed men.

**February 16, 1933** - Raymond H. Wilcox, Superintendent of Charities, asks the Board of Apportionment and Taxation for a total appropriation of $209,175 for the Charity Department, nearly one-half of which would be used to make up a deficiency caused by the work relief given by the department.

**April 30, 1933** - Charity Department spent $167,710.06 for the aid of outside poor during the 1932-1933 fiscal year, $132,710.06 above the appropriated amount. Some 776 families are being aided by the Charity Department by this time, and the department had spent $78,107 to provide work relief.

**April 1933** - 45 Middletown men are given work under a Federal reforestation program.

**August 17, 1933** - Charity Department receives a Federal grant for $12,351.

**Winter 1933** - As many as 833 Middletown residents are employed by the Civil Works Administration each week.
Appendix B: Employees of the following firms and members of the following organizations contributed to the Mayor’s Committee on Unemployment’s employment fund between October 1930 and April 1931:

Adorno Amusement Company
Alling Rubber Company
American Legion, Milardo Wilcox Post No. 75
American Lodge No. 1538, Sons of Italy
American Lodge No. 1538, Societa Guiseppe Garibaldi
Amicac Club
Anenberg Music Shop
R.J. Atwell Jewelry Store
Linus Baldwin’s employees
Baldwin Repair Co.
Barbara Stone Stores
B’Nai Brith: Middletown Lodge No. 897
A. Brazos & Sons
The F. Brewer Co.
Brown Brothers
James H. Bunce Co.
Butler’s Insurance Office
R.W. Camp Co.
Capitol Theatre Employees
Caulkins & Post, Inc.
Central National Bank
Chamber of Commerce
City Charity Department
City Schools
Clark & True, Inc.
Cody’s Shoe Store
Coleman Motor Car Co.
Connecticut Light & Power Co.
Connecticut Power Co.
Connecticut State Hospital
Connecticut State Hospital Employees’ Social Club
The John F. Convey Cigar Co.
W.J. Coughlin’s sons
The Cranston Co.
District Nurse Association
The Dreher-Smith Co.
Egeter Battery Co.
Empire Dyeing & Cleaning Co.
Exchange Club of Middletown
Family Welfare Association
Farmers & Mechanics Bank
   F.B. Fountain Co.
Fox-Becker Granite Co.
   Frissell Fabric Co.
General Ice Cream Corp.
Goodyear Rubber Co.
   W.T. Grant Co.
Guy, Rice & Davis
Hall’s Music Shop
Handy Lunch & Co.
John Hancock Insurance Co.
   Hazen’s Bookstore
Hebrew Ladies Aid Society
   Highway Dept. 2nd District
Holy Trinity Church
Jack’s Lunch
L.E. Kingston & Co.
Leonard & Herrmann Co.
   L.K. Liggett Co.
   Lion’s Club
   The Literary Club
Liturgical Club of Hubbard School
   Long Lane Farm
Marino Plumbing Co.
   First Methodist Episcopal Church
   Middletown Coal Co.
   Middletown Fire Dept.
   Middletown Fish Market
Middletown National Bank & Trust Co.
Middletown Press Publishing Co.
Middletown Savings Bank
   Middletown Silk Co.
   Middletown Trust Co.
Middlesex Hospital
   W.S. Miller, Inc.
Lyman D. Mills Co.
Morris Plan Bank
Officials of the Municipal Building
   G.C. Murphy Co.
   Neville’s Candy Shop
   Denis O’Brien & Sons
   I.E. Palmer Co.
Park View Pharmacy
Pelton’s Drug Store
J.C. Penney Co.
Police Benefit Fund
Police Department
Portland Silk Co.
The Remington Noiseless Typewriter Co.
Russell Library
Russell Manufacturing Co.
Savard & Lyon
Sears, Roebuck & Co.
J.O. Smith Manufacturing Co.
Southern New England Telephone Co.
Southmayd-Doolittle Co.
St. John’s Church Corp.
St. John’s School
Stage Employees and Motion Picture Operators, Middletown Local No. 350
The Stewart Press
Street Department-Superintendent and Engineering Dept.
The Toggery Shop
The Town Schools
Towner & Sellew Associates
United Cafeteria
The Village Grocery
Water Board
W.C.T.U.
Welker-Hoops Manufacturing Co.
Wesleyan University
Westfield Grange No. 50
Wetherbee & Conroy
Whalen Drug Co.
Wilcox-Crittenden Factory Employees
Wilcox-Crittenden Office Employees
Woodward Drug Store
Wrubel’s Inc.
Y.M.C.A. Employees
Y’s Men’s Club
The James Young Co.
The following individuals contributed to the Mayor's Committee on Unemployment's employment fund between October 1930 and April 1931:

Bishop and Mrs. E.C. Acheson
Miss Adeline E. Ackley
Professor A.C. Armstrong
  Curtiss S. Bacon
  Eben W. Bacon
Mrs. Francis A. Beach
Mrs. Henry S. Beers
Mrs. Emily Bell
Professor Herbert C. Bell
Miss Emily Binney
Mrs. John Binney
Dr. E.M. Bitgood
Mr. and Mrs. Walter A. Blau
William H. Bouteiller
Miss Julia A. Brazos
Mrs. Wilbur F. Burrows
Mrs. James C. Burr
Mrs. Bertha J. Butler
Mrs. F.L. Caulkins
Dr. Charles B. Chedel
Mrs. Charles B. Chedel
William Citron
  Citizen
Rev. M.J. Creeger, First M.E. Church
  L.O. & E.S. Davis
Mrs. Jessie DeMauriac
  Henry Engel
Miss Gladys N. Evans
Mrs. P.N. Evans
William E. Fairbank
  E.B. Fall
Mrs. E.B. Fall
  Harry Field
Dr. Jessie W. Fisher
William C. Fisher
John D. Fitzgerald
Mrs. Wilbur G. Foyle
"Friend" "E.A.B."
  Frank H. Frissell
Miss Grace R. Gabrielle
Miss Lucinda Gates
Rev. George B. Gilbert
Mrs. Lucy A. Gilbert
John Gilshenan
Mrs. Walter L. Green
Mrs. Marionette A. Hadley
Miss Helen M. Hall
Dr. Carl C. Harvey
Miss Florence A. Hennigar
Thomas Hoops
Mrs. A.J. Horton
Mrs. Emma H. Howland
Mrs. E. Kent Hubbard
Mrs. Henry W. Hubbard
Mrs. Chester L. Hull
Judge Ernest A. Inglis
Dr. S. Mary Ives
Miss Alice F. Jackson
Miss Cora Jackson
Miss Mary Jackson
August H. Johnson
Miss Mary Jones
Mrs. Walter C. Jones
Walter C. Jones
Howard N. Lincoln
Arthur Losey
Dr. John E. Loveland
M. Mallove
Salvatore Mazzotta
Mrs. Margaret F. McCarthy
Mrs. J.L. McConaughy
Miss Elizabeth Medlicott
Mrs. Caroline L. Miller
Miss Frances P. Miller
Mrs. Lyman D. Mills
Dr. John Mountain
Miss Caroline Penniman
Dr. F.E. Potter
Mrs. F.E. Potter
Miss Lucy N. Robinson
Rev. Herbert D. Rollason
Dr. E.R. Ross
Mrs. T.M. Russell
Mrs. Winifred R. Rymer
Mrs. Edward Schaefer
Arthur Sedgwick
Mrs. Lizzie W. Sherman
Miss Clara I. Singleton
Lowndes A. Smith
Miss Mary Anne Tuthill
Mrs. C.G.R. Vinal
Col. and Mrs. C.S. Wadsworth
Mrs. Thomas P. Walsh
Dr. O.S. Watrous
Hon. Frank B. Weeks
F.H. Wetherby
Miss Katharine M. Whalen
Mrs. Mary C. Whittlesey
William W. Wilcox, Sr.
Mrs. William W. Wilcox, Sr.
Mrs. William W. Wilcox, Jr.
Paul P. Wilcox
Mrs. Paul P. Wilcox
Dr. Ella A. Wilder
Mr. and Mrs. Gibson Wilson
Mrs. Mary H. Wilson
Mrs. Harold A. Williams
Mrs. Ella H. Yard

*See The Middletown Press, May 8, 1931, page 2
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