

Title of Lesson: *A Cry for Help in Alabama - 1934*

(Suggested grade level: 11th Grade American History from 1877 to Present)

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Author Information: Lillie Johnson, Bullock County High School

Adapted for AP by:

Mary Hubbard, Advanced Placement History Teacher, Retired,
Alabama History Education Initiative Consultant

Background Information:

The following links provide background information on the New Deal.

- The [Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum](#) offers a tremendous amount of information about Roosevelt's personal life and presidency.
- [The Encyclopedia of Alabama](#) offers an extensive selection of articles and multimedia resources dealing with almost all aspects of Alabama history, geography, culture, and natural environment. They have hundreds of relevant resources for this time period. Three search terms will help: "New Deal," "Roosevelt," and "Depression." There is a biography of Benjamin Miller, governor from 1931-35.
- [EDSITEment](#) is a partnership between the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Verizon Foundation, and the National Trust for the Humanities. It offers on-line lesson plans and links to over 200 websites dealing with the humanities. All have been reviewed by humanities scholars. A subject catalogue appears on the home page. Click on "History and Social Studies." Then in the drop-down box under "Subject Navigator," click "Great Depression." There are 12 lessons under this heading.
- [Library of Congress, Themed Resources for Teachers](#) offers a variety of resources for teachers and students, all dealing with the Great Depression. If you click on "lesson plans," it will bring up 10 lessons.
- "Letters from Alabama Citizens to the Governor" dramatically demonstrates some of the desperate situations people in Alabama faced during the Great Depression: [J. L. Worthington](#), [Frank Carter](#), [Mrs. Deller Williams](#), and [Rachel Wheeler](#).

Overview of lesson:

This lesson serves as an introduction to a study of the New Deal. It's based on letters written by Alabama citizens in 1934 asking for help from the state government. By analyzing these letters and the brief replies sent from the governor's office, students will gain a sense of the human toll the Great Depression took in this state, the inadequacy of state government to respond, and the need for help at the federal level. Students will then study major New Deal programs and speculate on how (and in what ways) those programs could have helped the original letter writers. They will also address the question of what the appropriate role of the federal government should be during an economic crisis (a relevant topic today).

Content Standards

[Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies](#) (Bulletin 2004, No. 18)

Grade 11: Content Standard 6

- Describe social and economic conditions from the 1920s through the Great Depression, factors leading to a deepening crisis, and successes and failures associated with the programs and policies of the New Deal.
- Describe the impact of the TVA, AAA, and CCC on Alabama and the Southeast.

National Standards for History, 1996

Era 8, Standard 1B - Explain the effects of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl on American farm owners, tenants, and sharecroppers. Analyze the impact of the Great Depression on the American family and on ethnic and racial minorities.

Standard 2C – Evaluate the significance and legacy of the New Deal.

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (Bulletin 111, 2010)

Standard 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Standard 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Standard 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

Primary Learning Objective(s):

Students will:

- Analyze letters Alabama citizens wrote to their governor in 1934 asking for help
- Draw tentative conclusions about the material circumstances facing some Alabama citizens in 1934 (circumstances relating to food, clothing and shelter)
- Evaluate the responses from the governor's office
- Research major New Deal programs and determine how those programs potentially helped the letter writers
- Discuss the questions of what the appropriate role of the federal government might be in times of economic crisis

Additional Learning Objective(s):

- Students will empathize with Alabama citizens struggling through the Great Depression.

Time allotted: 110-120 minutes

Materials and Equipment:

- Copies of the letters Alabama citizens wrote to the governor in 1934 & responses from the governor's office (see attachments)
- Map of Alabama so students can locate where the authors of the various letter writers lived (optional)
- Copies of the guiding questions (see attachments)
- Textbook with information on the Great Depression
- Chart for outlining government agencies (see attachments)

Technological Resources:

- Computer with internet access and digital projector (to show a copy of each letter to the whole class)

Background/Preparation:

Students will have already studied the Great Depression, prior to Franklin Roosevelt's inauguration in 1933. The teacher will have some knowledge of the desperate circumstances in Alabama during that time. Governor Miller was elected in 1930 pledging to restore the economy in Alabama, but was unable to do so. In addition, Alabama's government was overwhelmed with requests for help and didn't have the funds to respond. The belief among many Americans at the time was that the needy and the poor had no legitimate claim on public money. The New Deal, however, fundamentally expanded the role of the federal government in terms of providing a safety net.

Procedures/Activities:**Engagement/Motivation Activity:**

In order to generate interest, start the class with these questions:

- Do we have hard economic times today?
- What is evidence of that?
- Who should be most responsible for helping Americans in need: private charities, state governments, or the federal government?

Step 1	Since there are four letters from Alabama citizens in this lesson, divide the total number of students in your class by four to determine how many students to assign to each group. Give each group a copy of one letter along with the response it generated from the governor's office.
Step 2	Distribute guiding questions (see attachments). Instruct someone in each group to read the letter out loud. Everyone should work together to determine exactly what is being said.
Step 3	Students will discuss possible answers, but each student should record all reasonable answers on his or her own sheet.
Step 4	Conduct a whole-class discussion by displaying one letter at a time, asking a student to read it out loud, and then calling on the appropriate group to read its answers to the questions (every group member should read at least one answer). Encourage students in other groups to respond as well.
Step 5	When finished, help students draw conclusions about conditions in the state in 1934. Urge them to discuss the human toll those conditions were taking on people living here, both materially and psychologically. Undoubtedly, they will have noticed how unresponsive the state government was to these cries for help. How did they answer question # 3 on the guiding questions? (From a practical point of view, the state didn't have much money. And historically, cultural attitudes in America emphasized the individual's responsibility to provide for himself or herself. There was no tradition of state governments or the federal government providing substantial economic or social support to citizens. The fact that today we expect both levels of government to help distressed citizens is testament to the profound change the New Deal wrought.)
Step 6	Using their textbook as a source, students will complete a chart on various New Deal agencies (see attachments). The number of agencies can be adjusted to fit the class and the textbook.
Step 7	Conduct a discussion about the goals of each agency and ask students to determine which agencies could have helped the letter writers and what form that help would have taken. Urge them to be as specific as possible.
Step 8	To broaden the issue out, ask students to consider this historic question: What is the responsibility of the federal government during times of financial crisis? What arguments can be made for and against the federal government playing a strong role? For extra credit, students could collect current news articles and editorials that relate to this on-going debate, summarize the content, and then respond with their own opinions.

Assessment Strategies:

- Teacher will informally evaluate student participation in groups and whole class discussions. Charts on New Deal programs can be graded for accuracy and thoroughness.

Extension:

- Teacher can make arrangements for speakers from the Alabama Department of Human Resources and Social Security Office to speak about the different agencies. Students will have a better understanding of why these agencies were set up, how they work, and how they benefit the population.
- Students can assume the identity of one of the authors of a letter and write a diary entry ten years later talking about how the New Deal affected them.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR GREAT DEPRESSION LETTERS

Everyone should write down answers that the group generates.

A. LETTER FROM CITIZEN TO GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

1. What specific information can you learn about the author of your letter?
 - Name
 - Age (if not provided in the letter, make a guess about how old he or she might be)
 - Gender
 - Race
 - How educated the person seems to be
 - The city where he or she lives
2. What sort of help is this person requesting and why? Be as specific as possible and list all the things he or she is requesting, along with some brief explanation of why your individual needs those particular things.
3. How would you describe the tone of your letter: angry, demanding, polite, timid, frustrated, assertive, hopeful, cynical? Does the tone surprise you? Why or why not?
4. Even though your group has only read one letter, what tentative conclusions (at least two) can you draw about economic conditions in Alabama in 1934? Qualify your conclusions in as much detail as possible. (Don't just say conditions were "bad," describe the nature and extent of the "badness.") Be prepared to support your conclusions with facts from your letter.

B. RESPONSE TO LETTER

1. Who wrote the reply? Was it the governor? If not, identify the person by title.
2. What was the tone of the response? Use 2-3 adjectives to describe it. Does the tone surprise you? Why or why not?
3. Summarize what the reply said.

- C. Judging from just this one letter, do material, economic and political conditions of Alabamians in 1934 seem different from or similar to those today?

The New Deal

Agency	Abbrevi- -ation	Purpose	Person to be Helped or Problem to be Solved
Securities and Exchange Commission			
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation			
Agricultural Adjustment Administration			
National Recovery Administration			
Fed. Emergency Relief Agency			
Tennessee Valley Authority			
Civilian Conservation Corps			
Public Works Administration			

Agency	Abbrevi- -ation	Purpose	Person to be Helped or Problem to be Solved
Civil Works Administration			
Works Progress Administration			
National Labor Relations Board			
Social Security Act			
Fair Labor Standards Act			
National Housing Act			
Farm Security Administration			