

## Steam Shovels and Picnic Shelters: Photographs of CCC Camps in Massachusetts

### Context

This collection of photographs helps students and teachers to explore:

- The Civilian Conservation Corps and Roosevelt's New Deal (1933–1936)
- Using photographs as historical evidence

### Introduction and Background Information for Students

Neil M. Maher's book, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of CCC camps on the American landscape. In addition to the photographs presented in *Source, Story, History* the UMass Amherst Library has access to a variety of CCC camp newspapers through an online document delivery service.

Before beginning the discussion, students should have some general knowledge about Roosevelt's New Deal programs, including the CCC.

### Discussion

Begin the discussion by asking students to brainstorm everything they know about the CCC based on what they have learned in the course as well as outside knowledge.

Choose one photograph from the selection of images in *Source, Story, History* to analyze as a class, such as “Stone crusher and house, located about 600 yards south of campsite, Beartown Forest, Winter 1933-34.”

Begin by asking students to answer basic questions such as:

- Who is pictured?
- What are the subjects doing?
- What additional information does the caption provide?

Then proceed to more complex questions, such as:

- Does this image support or undermine assertions about the CCC made at the beginning of the discussion?
- What additional questions about the CCC does this photograph raise?
- Speculate on why and how this picture was taken: was the photographer a fellow CCC worker, or an administrator from the Works Progress Administration? How might the identity of the photographer affect the final image?
- Speculate on how and why the image was circulated: was it a personal memento or an official document?

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### Discussion (continued)

Discuss additional images as a class, or in smaller groups. Guide the discussion to address questions and themes such as:

**Conservation:** What constituted “conservation” for CCC laborers and the administrators that directed their work? What does the presence of logging roads and personal automobiles in these images suggest about the CCC definition of “conservation” in Massachusetts?

**Provenance:**<sup>1</sup> Little is known about the people who took and collected these photographs, although some images contain some clues.<sup>2</sup> Would knowing more about the provenance of these images change the way we interpret them?

**Visual or Verbal Evidence?** These photographs provide a detailed record of life in CCC camps, such as clothing, hair, and architectural styles, camp layout, and construction techniques, that are invisible in other kinds of documentary sources. But visual evidence can also distort the historical record: the number of African Americans in Massachusetts CCC camps, for example, may or may not be reflected in the appearance of one black man in over 30 images. Should we evaluate visual sources differently than written ones?

### Assignments and Additional Questions for Discussion

- A photograph of a log cabin in Myles Standish Forrest includes two captions: “Log cabin complete, Myles Standish State Forest” and “To prove that we are in the woods I am enclosing a picture of Franks office.” Image the “life” of this photograph, and how it might have acquired two captions. Which caption was written first? Who wrote each caption, and for what audience? What do these double captions suggest about the many ways a single photograph can be interpreted?
- What else might we learn about the experience of living in, or administering a CCC camp from other kinds of documentary sources, such as administrative records, oral histories, newspaper articles, or journals? What do these photographs of CCC camps in Massachusetts capture, that might be lost in other sources?

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1 Provide a definition of “provenance” if necessary: “the history of ownership of a valued object or work of art or literature,” Miriam Webster Dictionary.

2 See, for example, the initials “FRJ” on several images, as well as the caption signed “Peg” with reference to “Frank” on the photograph “Log cabin complete, Myles Standish State Forest.”