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# Consuming Relief: Food Stamps and the New Welfare of the New Deal

Rachel Louise Moran

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Amid the recession of 2009–2010, proponents of social service spending worked to define programs such as food stamps not as welfare, but as an economic “stimulus.” News reports emphasized how the stamps helped businesses hire more grocery store clerks and baggers, and described how the plan would help oil companies and public transportation, as grocery shoppers would need to bring their goods home. Most importantly, reports emphasized how these nutrition programs moved hungry people through grocery stores and increased these people’s spending. Increased funding to food stamps was pushed by emphasizing the program’s potential for economic stimulus rather than by using the language of rights, needs, or entitlements. This conceptualization of welfare, particularly food welfare, as a method of consumer stimulus rather than social service is not new. It is rooted in New Deal efforts to transform relief programs into consumer programs, efforts illustrated well by the first food stamp program, which ran from 1939 to 1943.<sup>1</sup>

Although the first Food Stamp Plan presaged the largest welfare state program in the United States, it has received little attention from scholars. Work that considers the consumerist aspect of the New Deal welfare state focuses on the middle class and employed working class. Studies specifically on food stamps coming out of sociology and political science overlook consumption motives and portray New Deal food relief as a project of compromise with agricultural lobbyists. In one assessment, food stamps and related programs are the product of the “paradox of want amid plenty”—the coexistence of agricultural surplus and human want. The author of another study similarly argues that the rise of the power of large commercial farmers in federal politics in the 1930s created the conservative Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which impeded the creation of a “true welfare program.” In both analyses, the Food Stamp Plan is a compromise rather than an innovation, a way of navigating conflicting policy interests and keeping the needs of relief recipients last.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Cordes, “Stimulus Boost for Food Stamp Recipients,” *CBS Evening News*, April 3, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/04/03/eveningnews/ondemand/main4918168.shtml>. Pam Fessler, “Stimulus Would Help States Provide Food Stamps,” *National Public Radio*, Feb. 10, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100497727>. Christine Vestal, “Food Stamp Stimulus Hits State Economies,” *Stateline*, May 19, 2009, <http://www.stateline.org/live/details/story?contentId=401013>.

<sup>2</sup> The Food Stamp Program, renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2008, is currently the largest public assistance program in the United States. As of 2008, the time of the last available statistics, the plan cost almost \$38 million annually and served 28.5 million Americans. On the middle class and employed working class, see Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca,

These discussions leave out two important components of the program, however. First, these studies describe the tensions around New Deal food policy as being primarily between agricultural interests and the hungry people who could be fed with agricultural products. These studies overlook another player in these policy debates: business. Agricultural interests influenced the basic shape that U.S. food welfare took, but it was not the only force involved. In fact, the shape food welfare has taken is the result of the efforts of multiple actors in the 1930s and 1940s. As grocers, wholesalers, politicians, and farmers negotiated the direction food welfare would take, their overlapping investments created a consumption-focused, Keynesian program that paralleled the path postwar economics would take in the United States. The prominence of in-kind and coupon-based relief, a focus on family and children as deserving consumers, movement through grocery stores, and restrictions on purchases were important components of the New Deal Food Stamp Plan. More critically, however, those characteristics also indicated a long-term trend toward a consumer-oriented welfare state.

Second, discussions of the Food Stamp Plan that focus primarily on the power of agricultural interests are weighed down by concerns of New Deal historiography from the 1960s through the 1980s. The sociologist Janet Poppendieck, writing in the late 1960s, aligned her findings with those of the New Left historian Barton J. Bernstein. They both conclude that New Deal programs upheld capitalism much more than the programs challenged it. Kenneth Finegold's analysis, from 1988, on the other hand, is driven by arguments centered on state capacity and emphasizes structural impediments to New Deal policy making. These studies of food stamps thus tend to emphasize the conservative pressures shaping New Deal policy and characterize the Food Stamp Plan as a fairly conservative program. My findings do not challenge the idea that the Food Stamp Plan represented a shoring up of capitalism, nor do they deny that conservative pressures shaped program design. Instead, my findings question the impetus behind these design choices, the economic interests that shaped them, and the larger impact that the Food Stamp Plan had on ideas about welfare recipients and American poverty.<sup>3</sup>

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1997); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990); and Meg Jacobs, "'Democracy's Third Estate': New Deal Politics and the Construction of a 'Consuming Public,'" *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 55 (Spring 1999), 27–51. An exception is Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830–1998* (Chapel Hill, 1999). For a study specifically on welfare and consumption (though not based in the 1930s), see Felicia Kornbluh, *The Battle for Welfare Rights: Politics and Poverty in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2007). Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (New Brunswick, 1985). Kenneth Finegold, "Agriculture and the Politics of U.S. Social Provision: Social Insurance and Food Stamps," in *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States*, ed. Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol (Princeton, 1988), 222.

<sup>3</sup> Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat*, xvii; Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York, 1968), 263–88; Finegold, "Agriculture and the Politics of U.S. Social Provision." On state capacity arguments that emphasize structural impediments to New Deal policy making, see Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985); and Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol, eds., *Politics of Social Policy in the United States*. For classic perspectives on the New Deal's conservatism, see Bernstein, "New Deal"; and Howard Zinn, ed., *New Deal Thought* (Indianapolis, 1966). On the New Deal's liberal successes, see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. I: *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Boston, 1957); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. II: *The Coming of the New Deal, 1933–1935* (Boston, 1958); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt*, vol. III: *The Politics of Upheaval, 1935–1936* (Boston, 1960); and Mario Einaudi, *The Roosevelt Revolution* (New York, 1959). For the compromise position that the New Deal was a "halfway revolution," see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932–1940* (New York, 1963), 347.

Since publication of those analyses of the Food Stamp Plan, the tenor of much New Deal historiography has shifted. Moving away from questions of conservatism and institutional constraints, a spate of newer works focus on New Deal consumption and the era of consumer politics that followed. These works tend to look at working- and middle-class consumers rather than poor welfare recipients and analyze the relationship of those consumers to the state through spending habits.<sup>4</sup>

This school of consumption politics rebuffs the previous emphasis on the New Deal's conservatism and, in particular, denies that conservatism can be evidenced through a polity interested in passive purchasing rather than in active political engagement. Lizabeth Cohen argues that consumption patterns among working-class Chicanos paved the way for cross-ethnic communication and, eventually, unionization. Meg Jacobs also argues that labor benefitted from the prominence of consumption in the 1930s through the alliance that formed between unions and middle-class consumers. As unions campaigned for higher wages that would allow members to purchase goods, middle-class housewives demanded that the prices of goods be kept under control. Together, this "purchasing power" coalition politicized their consumer needs and directed New Deal policy toward support of their consumerism. Even as the 1930s saw American disposable income declining, asserts this school of thought, policy makers increasingly conceived of all Americans as consumers. While some "citizen consumers" participated in politics as consumer advocates, many others expressed their politics simply through their purchasing power, gaining the moniker "purchaser consumers." Purchaser consumers were not apolitical, as previous generations of historians once insisted, but were actually engaged in shaping consumption policy toward their interests.<sup>5</sup>

This placement of consumption and Keynesian economic policy ("purchasing power" politics) at the heart of New Deal historiography has breathed new life into that scholarship. At the same time, however, that focus comes with limitations. Notably, these approaches uniformly turn a blind eye to the relationship of consumer politics to the poorest of the poor. While they explore the opportunities afforded some unionized workers and middle-class African Americans under the rise of consumer politics, true destitution is presumed to be unchanged. This could not be further from the truth, however. The rise of consumer politics not only reshaped policies aimed at middle-class consumers but it also altered approaches to the welfare state. Most notably, it encouraged policy makers to imagine those on relief as consumers or, at least, proto-consumers. While middle-class

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Mittelstadt, "Consumer History: A New History of the Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order," *Reviews in American History*, 33 (Sept. 2005), 431–38. On works that focus on New Deal consumption and the era of consumer politics, see Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, 1989), 85–121; Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Michele F. Pacifico, "'Don't Buy Where You Can't Work': The New Negro Alliance of Washington," *Washington History*, 6 (Spring–Summer 1994), 66–88; and Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 327. Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2005), 5. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003), 18. On the tension between business and consumer activists, see Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York, 2002), esp. 122–24; and Daniel Scroop, "The Anti-Chain Store Movement and the Politics of Consumption," *American Quarterly*, 60 (Dec. 2008), 925–49.

housewives demanded increased purchasing power, some policy makers imagined ways of providing this same power to welfare recipients.<sup>6</sup>

The results of these consumer-welfare plans were mixed. While consumer-based food welfare programs offered some choice and decreased the stigmatization of relief clients, they did so in a way that promised government control over relief clients' funds. Relief clients were asked to pay at least \$1.00 a week to gain a \$1.50 in benefits, for example, guaranteeing relief clients increased their food purchasing and consumption. Since the \$1.50 was returned to the client in stamps good only at approved retailers, relief clients were forced to use markets to purchase goods rather than receive them free from welfare depots. The use of supermarkets promised to mainstream relief clients and eliminate the stigma of the welfare depot, but this consumer-based welfare program also determined how much clients would spend on food and where they would spend it. Likewise, recipients could choose nearly any foodstuffs they wanted—as opposed to in-kind food relief—but they still faced purchasing restrictions (on alcohol or foreign foods, for instance), as well as limited choice of foodstuffs. Perhaps most critically, this effort to imagine relief recipients as consumers who needed a little “stimulus” effectively undermined the idea that hunger prevention should be a concern of the American state. While social workers discussed the importance of reducing hunger, policy that centered on hunger as a human right rather than an economic issue was rarely if ever articulated by politicians or lobbyists in the late 1930s. Policy makers of the 1930s experimented with approaching the American welfare state as a consumer program that would use individuals' Keynesian interests to stimulate the larger economy, but welfare consumption never quite mirrored projects of stimulating middle-class “purchasing power.”<sup>7</sup>

### From Yellow Grapefruits to Blue Stamps

In the depression, unemployed Americans scraped together meager dinners of flour and water and skipped many meals. Some lived on coffee or apples. Hunger pangs and malnourishment were commonplace. When the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) infamously ordered the plowing under of crops and the slaughtering of piglets to steady farm prices in 1933, its apparent disregard for hungry citizens grabbed headlines. A farmer named Byron R. Newton wrote to the *New York Times* arguing that the irony of agricultural abundance paired with urban hunger was evidence that “something has disturbed the orderly process of our thinking.”<sup>8</sup>

In response to public outcry over these “piglet massacres,” President Franklin D. Roosevelt accelerated the introduction of a program already under development to distribute agricultural surpluses to the unemployed. The newly organized Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC) set up commissaries in 1933, and in 1935 responsibility for them was moved to the USDA. Then, under a 1935 amendment to the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the FSRC authorized a program that channeled surplus commodities from farms to the

<sup>6</sup> For studies that emphasize consumption and Keynesian economic policy, see John W. Jeffries, “A ‘Third New Deal’? Liberal Policy and the American State, 1937–1945,” *Journal of Policy History*, 8 (Oct. 1996), 387–409; and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Jordan, “GOP Budgets for the Hungry,” *Nation*, Dec. 14, 1939, p. 708. Byron R. Newton, “Lacking Foresight: Much Might Be Done Easily to Relieve Distress,” *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1932, p. 18.

needy—but the people receiving these goods had to be poor enough that no market demand for the commodities was disturbed. This marked a shift in the urban public's interest in programs to aid farmers. Whereas in the past agricultural relief led to a decrease in commodity prices at the supermarket, putting the urban poor and rural farmers at odds, this program addressed the needs of both constituencies. Public claims on agricultural goods began to be treated as valid and were wed to public concerns about hunger. While the perceived validity of this claims making would become critical to shaping food welfare, the commodities program was rife with problems. The social workers' magazine *Survey Mid-Monthly* described it as "plain old-fashioned relief combining the worst features of the commissary, the grocery basket, and the bread line." The journalist Gertrude Springer described the scene of "a long queue of dreary women with baby carriages, old men with sacks, boys with little wagons, awaiting their turn." The plan provided commodities such as grapefruits and powdered milk to people unfamiliar with these foodstuffs and did so without concern for the recipients' nutritional needs and tastes. The stigma of public food pickup and a general disregard for recipients' needs and wants were thus built into the welfare program.<sup>9</sup>

The mass-distributed grapefruits became a powerful symbol of the commodity program's shortcomings. While grapefruits were surplus crops in the U.S. South and West, the citrus fruit was unfamiliar to many northerners and midwesterners. Senator Richard Russell Jr., a conservative southern Democrat, illustrated what he saw as the ridiculousness of distributing surplus commodities by describing an "old lady in the Ozarks who was boiling grapefruit, boiling it in a big tub of hot water, thinking it was something like okra." The more sympathetic found the overemphasis on foods such as grapefruit, which was reportedly all some families received, nutritionally dangerous. Social workers and left-leaning politicians also expressed concern over the shame-inducing way these unfamiliar goods were distributed. Urban clients waited in lines at special commodity centers; rural clients were offered relief from the back of trucks. This public distribution worried politicians and government officials who felt this distribution process paralleled communism. Social critics worried that urban women sometimes left their children unattended for hours while waiting in lines, thus undermining family stability. While this distribution offered some relief to the poor and to farmers, the methods being used appeared dangerous for the political system as a whole. Some argued instead that an emerging progressive capitalism would need to emphasize consumer access, particularly in the arena of food, to ensure political calm. As the businessman Milo Perkins explained, increased consumer access was "the price which capitalism must pay to perpetuate itself," a price that was "cheap" and "preferable to fascism or communism." Commodity distribution, on the other hand, kept citizens underfed, undermined families, and continuously reminded poor citizens of their reliefer status. This distribution method helped farmers, but it made social workers and politicians extraordinarily nervous.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Agricultural Adjustment Act Amendment of 1935, Pub. L. 74-320, sec. 32 (Aug. 24, 1935). Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat*, 124–25, 196–97. Gertrude Springer, "The Federal Breadline," *Survey Mid-Monthly*, March 1939, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1941*, 76 Cong., 3 sess., Feb. 28, 1940, p. 249. Joanna C. Colcord, "Stamps to Move the Surplus," *Survey Mid-Monthly*, Oct. 1939, p. 305. On how relief clients could threateningly gather under the banner of rights in this period, see Elna C. Green, "Relief from Relief: The Tampa Sewing-Room Strike of 1937 and the Right to Welfare," *Journal of American History*, 95 (March 2009), 1012–37. Milo Perkins, "What Businessmen Think: Grab the Torch, Men of Means, Grab the Torch!," *Nation*, Nov. 28, 1934, p. 620.



Welfare recipients wait in line for government-issued surplus food in 1936 as part of the Surplus Commodities Program. These public, presumably shaming methods of surplus distribution removed the poor from the normal avenues of food shopping. *Courtesy Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y., Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Public Domain Photographs, image 195894.*

While social workers and politicians found fault with this distribution method, many in the business community were absolutely livid. *Business Week* referred to the program as “a commissary system bypassing commercial channels,” retail grocers, and their attendant wholesale distributors. The 1920s had witnessed the explosion of “supermarkets,” which stocked a greater variety of goods than mom-and-pop groceries, sold nationally recognized brand-name products, and consolidated multiple shopping trips to butchers and bakers into one stop. Although chain grocery stores such as A&P and Safeway originated earlier, it was only amid the hard economic times of the 1930s that supermarket chains selling prepackaged goods at competitive prices proliferated. These growing grocery chains prompted independent stores to join with wholesalers to form professional

lobbying organizations to increase their political clout. Chain retailers did the same. Both groups, concerned that the free grapefruits of the commodities program were diverting relief clients away from grocery stores, lobbied for a new approach to food distribution that put retailer interests first and turned relief recipients into proper consumers.<sup>11</sup>

The first program to reach out to the overlapping interests of grocers, wholesalers, agricultural lobbyists, and poor consumers (represented by social workers) was Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace's Two-Price Plan, introduced in 1938. The plan proposed a two-price scale—one for regular consumers and one for relief recipients, with the federal government making up the price difference between the two on agricultural goods. The plan pleased grocers and wholesalers because it increased consumption and ensured that poor people used the “normal channels” of consumption. Unlike the commodities plan, the Two-Price Plan referred to the relief these poor men and women received as a type of consumer behavior. Farmers and retailers, however, feared federal competition and price setting. Even more, they suspected that seeing the lower price for the poor might convince average consumers that the unsubsidized prices were marked up too high. Some businessmen also feared Wallace's program would exacerbate class conflict. The National Retail Dry Goods Association president Saul Cohn explained his organization's disapproval of the plan, arguing “it is a serious mistake and a price too high to pay for this nation to change its complexion from a class-less to a class-conscious society.” Theodore Christianson of the National Association of Retail Grocers concurred: “Even if the plan could be honestly administered, it would be of doubtful social utility to effect a definite and perhaps permanent segregation of society into two sharply defined strata.” Political cartoons imagined grocery stores literally split along class lines, with the poor in one aisle and the wealthy in another. Wallace's plan might make poor people into a type of consumer, but businessmen were clear that it was not the type of consumer they were looking to attract. The plan, unable to mobilize a major coalition of supporters, never got off the ground.<sup>12</sup>

The next program, designed with grocers, wholesalers, agriculture interests, and poor consumers in mind, fared better: the 1939 Food Stamp Plan. This plan, the creation of grocers and wholesalers in particular, avoided most of the objections raised about the Two-Price Plan and the distribution of surplus commodities. Wholesalers had felt cheated by the state's role in the surplus commodities program and had much to gain in overhauling it. When the USDA had bought its surplus directly from farmers, wholesalers became redundant, bypassed middlemen. The National American Wholesale Grocers Association (NAWGA) thus proposed the original design for the Food Stamp Plan at its 1939 convention to reinsert themselves into the chain of government food provision. No stranger to politics, the NAWGA had previously proposed legislation to curtail the power of chain retailers. Now they sent their plan to the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation (FSCC) (which, aptly, replaced the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation), where the chief

<sup>11</sup> “Poor Will Get U.S. Food Stamps,” *Business Week*, March 4, 1939, p. 15. Tracey Deutsch, *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 2010), 43. On the rise of the supermarket, see James M. Mayo, *The American Grocery Store: The Business Evolution of an Architectural Space* (Westport, 1993); and Kim Humphery, *Shelf Life: Supermarkets and the Changing Cultures of Consumption* (Cambridge, Eng., 1998).

<sup>12</sup> “Two-Price Plan,” *Time*, Nov. 14, 1938, p. 63. “Criticizes 2-Price Plan,” *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1938, p. 25. Theodore Christianson, “Is Uncle Sam Going into the Loss-Leader Business?,” *National Grocers Bulletin*, Dec. 1938, p. 44.

Milo Perkins, a former businessman with an interest in Keynesian economics, and Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, looking for a way to solve the widespread discontent with both the commodities plan and two-price plans, took up the proposal. The bureaucrats reworked the plan and a few weeks later proposed it as their own to retail grocer groups.<sup>13</sup>

The plan allowed wholesalers to purchase surplus commodities from farmers. These wholesalers then sold the goods to grocers, who subsequently sold them to housewives of all classes. Supporters referred to this as the “normal channels of trade.” Rather than create two prices, the government subsidized the purchase of regularly priced goods through the issuance of colored-coded food stamps. Families on relief purchased a minimum amount of orange stamps for \$1.00 each and then received blue stamps worth an extra 50 percent of the orange ones. Relief recipients redeemed orange stamps for any food product except alcohol, tobacco, and imported or “luxury” items. The blue stamps could only be used for agricultural commodities that had been designated as surplus. This plan sought to increase farmers’ earnings from overproduced goods such as eggs, pears, and pork by providing adequate purchasing power for relief recipients to behave as full-price paying consumers. A song summed up the plan’s layers of benefits: “Help the farmer, help yourself/. Help the grocer clear his shelf.”<sup>14</sup>

President Milo Perkins of the FSCC, in a speech to the National Association of Food Chains, explained, “For fruits and vegetables there is a tremendous potential market. Given purchasing power, poor people will buy trainload after trainload of citrus, tomatoes, cabbage, peaches, and other fruits and vegetables.” Poor people, this new plan promised, could be transformed from meager relief recipients into viable consumers. That this consumption could, according to increasingly popular Keynesian economics, improve the economy as a whole, was an added benefit.<sup>15</sup>

This attraction to food stamp consumers was not completely out of the blue, as grocers had become increasingly invested in poor consumers in the 1930s. As more urban Americans struggled with declining purchasing power in the depression years, grocers framed the urban poor as consumers even before welfare policy makers did. Chain stores emphasized that their low prices were a boon to poor women. The trade journal *Chain Store Age* ran an article in March 1939 that coincided with the official beginning of the Food Stamp Plan and highlighted the humanitarian interests of chain stores. Told from a receptionist’s point of view, the article explained that chain store men were “not cold, sharp-toothed mercenaries . . . [but] warm, charitable, ethical, clean-living men.” They opposed price-raising taxes on chain stores, which would hurt poor mothers who benefited from chain store prices. “Don’t you agree with me,” the receptionist asked, “that the attention should be placed on raising that 17-cent income factor to higher levels by wisely considered and unselfish legislation rather than to destroy a system which after its destruction would only leave the poor poorer?” The National Association of Retail Grocers ran an article in their trade journal explaining that the “unfair and unethical, as well as ruthless and selfish

<sup>13</sup> “Stamps for Food,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1939, p. E2; Ray Harvey, *Want in the Midst of Plenty: The Genesis of the Food Stamp Plan* (Washington, 1941), 15. On the National American Wholesale Grocers Association’s relationship to anti-chain store legislation, see Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 162–64.

<sup>14</sup> “Poor Will Get U.S. Food Stamps.” “Mayor Wows ‘Em with Food Drama Based on New Stamp Plan for City,” *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1941, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Milo Perkins, “Agricultural Aspects of Food Stamp Plan Operations,” in *Summary of Statement at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the National Association of Food Chains* (Chicago, 1939), 5–6. Donohue, *Freedom from Want*, 247.

buying and selling practices on the part of corporate chains in the food industry, has contributed to our country's economic depression and general unemployment." The placement of these articles in trade journals, and not solely in ads, suggests grocers and wholesalers were working to convince not just the public about their social welfare intentions but also to reinforce those ideas within the industry. After all, Perkins explained, 42 percent of the nation was "low-income," but this large low-income population purchased only 26 percent of the nation's food. With a food-specific purchasing power boost for these poor consumers, these merchants realized, grocery businesses and wholesalers could see their profits explode. While independent stores, more common than chains in poor neighborhoods, had the most to gain from the stamp plan, all grocers in stamp areas benefited.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the Food Stamp Plan, with the heavy investment of grocers, wholesalers, and other retailers, promised a new kind of relief to hungry Americans, one that would also help agriculture, as did previous plans. But more interestingly, this relief plan would also help business, both in a direct financial way and by creating a new consumer class whose consumption would be shaped by the directives of these businesses. The presumed problem of agricultural overproduction was repackaged as a "problem of under-consumption." Rather than plow under fields or slaughter piglets, government agents needed to figure out how to sell all these agricultural products. One potential solution was to transform relief recipients into relief consumers. Not only would this solve the problems of agricultural surplus and business discontent but it would also offer a new direction for relief and the welfare state.

The outcome of this new social provision was mixed, however. On the one hand, recipients seem to have faced minimal stigma, and the program also seems to have benefited African Americans and women as "consumers" in a way other New Deal welfare programs did not. On the other hand, assuming the role of consumer rather than that of relief recipient put new surveillance and constraints on stamp users and their spending habits. While some food stamp recipients and potential recipients praised the program, others rejected this consumer model of relief. As a result, we must question the extent to which poor Americans in the 1930s and early 1940s seized on a citizen-consumer identity.<sup>17</sup>

### Welfare without Stigma?

From the perspective of business leaders and politicians the plan was a rapid success. It was first implemented in Rochester, New York, early in 1939. By July 1940 it was operating in eighty-three areas and serving 1.5 million recipients. In late 1941 the program expanded to serve approximately 5 million Americans, or 4 percent of the nation's population. By December 1942 the Food Stamp Plan had spread to 1,354 counties and was available to 61.5 percent of the nation's poor. Consumption like this, supporters reasoned, had the potential to improve the economy as a whole. The FSCC, however, did not typically refer to those served as the nation's poor, or as relief recipients. In this new vision of welfare these were "low-income people" with "increased buying power in the form of

<sup>16</sup> Lillian Hammers, "Patman Bill Would Make the Poor Poorer," *Chain Store Age*, March 1939, p. 28. "Chain Store Tax Bill in Limelight," *National Grocers Bulletin*, April 1940, p. 14. Milo Perkins, *The Challenge of Under-Consumption* (Des Moines, 1940), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, *Consumer's Republic*, 15.

special stamps,” or “needy consumers.” Others described food stamp users with the oxymoronic label “relief consumers.” For their business architects, food stamp benefits were not welfare as much as stimulus. The introduction of food stamps represented a new approach to welfare state benefits, one that led to a broad-based reconceptualizing of welfare recipients as consumers. These welfare benefits boasted positive press, a high approval rating across classes, celebrity endorsement, and innumerable requests for the expansion of the program into different areas and different recipient pools.<sup>18</sup>

From the beginning, the program was met with approval. Gallup polls in 1939 suggested 70 percent approval ratings for the plan, although the question misrepresented the plan’s aims. The Gallup poll of three thousand people asked specifically about approval for a plan in which “The government . . . lets people on relief buy certain farm products below their regular selling price. The government makes up the difference to the merchant.” While technically accurate, that description ignores the process of stamp purchasing, while still expressing some of the general goals of the plan. Most notably, it characterizes a transitioning of “people on relief” into people buying products. Not only did 70 percent of those asked approve of the plan, a further breakdown of the numbers suggests just how popular the concept of welfare consumers could prove. Seventy-two percent of urbanites not on relief approved, while a full 88 percent of relief clients found the idea promising. The lowest level of approval came from farmers, the majority of whom nevertheless offered approval. That 56 percent of farmers approved of the plan is particularly notable since the food stamp plan offered less direct benefit to agriculture than previous programs, due to the inclusion of grocers and wholesalers.<sup>19</sup>

In cities where the plan was in effect, local polls suggested overwhelming support for it. In Philadelphia, only 14 percent of those polled disapproved; in New York City it was 7 percent, and in Providence it was 11 percent. While large margins of neutrality make it difficult to gauge just how much approval the average answerer had for the plan, few opposed a plan that took relief recipients off direct relief and moved them into the normal channels of paying grocery store customers.<sup>20</sup>

The national press not only provided intensive coverage of this story but it also offered strong support for the plan. *Newsweek* reported that the administration was “delighted,” grocers were “pleased,” and “demand for the eight surplus commodities [available for blue stamps] proved so great stores were able to cut prices sharply and still make a profit.” An editorial in *Collier’s* announced that the editors were “increasingly excited” and that “it looks as if we’ve hit on something good.” The *New York Times* called the program “amazingly popular.” A study compiled by the Department of Agriculture categorized 213 editorials about the plan published from March 1939–January 1940 in newspapers and magazines across the nation. They found ninety-seven editorials expressing excitement over the experiment, twenty-one that believed the program to be an improvement over

<sup>18</sup> Norman L. Gold, A. C. Hoffman, and Frederick V. Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan* (Washington, 1940), 3. “The Stamp Plan Shows the Way,” *Business Week*, Feb. 1, 1941, p. 36. Ruth White, “The Effect on Needy Families of Suspension of the Food Stamp Plan,” *Social Security Bulletin*, 6 (Nov. 1943), 20. Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, *Report of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation for the Fiscal Year 1940* (Washington, 1940), 2–3. Harvey, *Want in the Midst of Plenty*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> “Questionnaire Profile: Gallup Poll #167,” questions qn8a, qn8b, Aug. 17, 1939, available at *Gallup Brain*, <http://brain.gallup.com/documents/questionnaire.aspx?STUDY=AIPO0167&p=1>. Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 80–81.

<sup>20</sup> Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 80–81.

previous methods of handling surplus and hunger, eight in favor of the show of business-government cooperation, and six in favor of program expansion. Negative editorials were far less frequent and focused primarily on the economic dangers of government intervention (fourteen editorials) and the cost of such a plan (nine editorials). In total, according to the Department of Agriculture's classification, two hundred positive editorials ran in that period, compared with fifty-two negative ones.<sup>21</sup>

The grocers and wholesalers behind the plan remained its strongest supporters. The *National Grocers Bulletin* described the plan as "an important means of boosting sales." Grocers in low-income areas in the first test city, Rochester, reported that profits had increased by 12 percent. According to the USDA, merchants expressed overwhelming interest in the plan. In 1939, food merchants in Rochester; Dayton, Ohio; Des Moines, Iowa; and Seattle, Washington (among the first handful of cities in which the Food Stamp Plan was implemented), were surveyed about the plan. In Des Moines, 94 percent of grocers serving medium-income clientele approved of the plan, as did 89 percent of those serving medium-income clientele. Even those stores serving high-income clients expressed approval or chose not to reply to the survey at all; none expressed disapproval. Of the 115 polled stores in Des Moines, only four expressed any disapproval of the Food Stamp Plan. These figures were duplicated in other test cities. Of all those with opinions on food stamps, grocery store merchants and low-income shoppers appear the most uniformly excited about this welfare innovation. The National Association of Chain Stores gathered information about possible stamp plan test cities, and local branches of these chain stores responded with excitement. The Safeway stores of Oakland, California, wrote that they "will be glad to cooperate." Hill Grocery of Birmingham, Alabama, explained that "we will be glad for you to call on us," and Council Oak Stores of Sioux City, Iowa, insisted theirs would be "a mighty good town" for stamp expansion. J. Frank Grimes of the Independent Grocers' Alliance of America insisted that he knew "of nothing that has been done by any governmental agency in a long period of years that has met with such universal approval." The National Association of Retail Grocers issued a resolution at their 1940 convention in which they went "on record to encourage the Honorable Milo Perkins, President of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, and the Honorable Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture and urge them to extend the plan to all of the United States as quickly as possible." American grocers, it seems, stood firmly behind food stamps.<sup>22</sup>

The impact of the plan on the business community went beyond grocers, however, and even *Business Week* called the plan "new, original, important." Although *Business Week*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 84. "Food for Stamps," *Newsweek*, May 29, 1939, p. 38. Thomas H. Beck, editorial, *Collier's*, Aug. 12, 1939, p. 54. R. L. Duffus, "In Place of Surplus—Food Stamps," *Times Wide World*, June 9, 1940, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> "Food Stamp Plan Is Solving Distribution Problem," *National Grocers Bulletin*, April 1945, p. 22. "Food-Stamp Plan Makes Hit," *Business Week*, Aug. 19, 1939, p. 19. Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 81–82. Wallace N. Flint, assistant to the president of the National Association of Food Chains, to Milo Perkins, April 6, 1939, folder 2, box 3, Records of the Food and Cotton Stamp Program, Correspondence of the Food Stamp Program, 1939–1943, Records of the Surplus Marketing Administration, RG 124 (National Archives, College Park, Md.). J. Frank Grimes, president of the Independent Grocers' Alliance of America, to Ralph Headley, director of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, Aug. 4, 1939, Records of the Food and Cotton Stamp Program, Correspondence regarding the General Food Stamp Program, 1940–1943, folder 2, box 3, Records of the Surplus Marketing Administration. Resolution enclosed with letter from R. M. Kiefer, secretary-manager of the National Association of Retail Grocers, to Perkins, Feb. 22, 1940, *ibid.*

lamented the presence of agricultural interests in policy making, arguing that the full possibilities of stimulating low-income consumption through private businesses could not be realized as long as agricultural needs were prioritized, the publication's overall assessment of the plan was sympathetic. The program's vanguard imagined a renaissance of business-government cooperation: as Milo Perkins put it, "That pattern of business-like cooperation may be more important than the Stamp Plan itself." Elsewhere, he denied the economic impetus of this business-government cooperation, explaining, "the fact that you grocers will make a nickel out of this program is only another way of saying that you are worthy of hire for the services you render." While the main beneficiaries of the original commodities program had been farmers, the new business orientation of the Food Stamp Plan turned farmers from enthusiastic supporters into vocal detractors of food welfare measures. This uneven distribution of gains helped line up business interests behind the program, with both their wallets and their reputations enhanced through business-government cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

Politicians also found much to support in the program, given the diversity of interest groups it helped. Rep. Charles H. Leavy, a Democrat from Washington, pointed out that there were over 2 million people on Old Age Assistance but only 18 percent of them were using food stamps. Democratic senator Richard Russell Jr. of Georgia called for expanding the program because "those communities [without the plan] are being discriminated against, in the sense that they are not obtaining their fair proportion of surplus commodities." Democrats included the expansion of the stamp plan in their 1940 platform, with a specific reference to how it helped "needy consumers." The Republican platform also nodded in the direction of the plan that year, though its discussion of "intelligent management of surpluses" did not refer to the stamp plan by name. Local politicians, meanwhile, fought for the expansion of food stamps to their towns and cities and endorsed the program heartily when it arrived. In an extraordinary example of such an endorsement, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York City developed and starred in a one-act play touting the benefits of the plan to celebrate its arrival in the city.<sup>24</sup>

Relief recipients and their representatives, welfare officials and social workers, generally expressed approval of the plan. Unlike with other welfare plans, observers excitedly described the "neat," "well dressed," and even occasionally "white collar" stamp users with approval. Interviews with small groups of relief clients in Rochester, Dayton, and Seattle revealed that 89 percent of them "like the new Food Stamp Plan." In a simultaneous survey of welfare officials in these cities, 93 percent approved of the plan and 94 percent wanted to see it continued. Only 1 percent of the welfare officials surveyed believed "needy families would be better off under the old distribution method." Joanna Colcord, a researcher for the Russell Sage Foundation who had written scathing articles on the shaming effect of direct relief distribution, stated that interviews she conducted with twelve food stamp recipients in Rochester demonstrated the program's superiority to any

<sup>23</sup> "Stamp Plan Shows the Way," 29, 36–37. Perkins, "Agricultural Aspects of Food Stamp Plan Operations," 8. Milo Perkins, *Eating the Surplus: An Address by Milo Perkins, President of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation at a Meeting of the National Association of Retail Grocers at Kansas City on Wednesday, June 21, 1939* (Washington, 1939), 5. F. W. Shields, "The Farmers' Empty Pocketbook," *National Grocers Bulletin*, March 1940, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Agriculture Department Appropriations, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1943*, 77 Cong., 2 sess., Jan. 29, 1942, part 2, p. 104. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Agricultural Appropriation Bill for 1943*, 77 Cong., 2 sess., 1942, p. 676. Harvey, *Want in the Midst of Plenty*, 29. "Mayor Vows 'Em with Food Drama Based on New Stamp Plan for City," 21.



This posed photo from 1941 illustrates the transfer of food stamps—illustrated with the Roman goddess of plenty—for attractive surplus grocery items. *Courtesy National Archives, College Park, Md., Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, Food Stamps folder, image 16-G-321-1-1106.*

that came before. Colcord's interviewees found the plan convenient and nutritious, and while a few reported that they were required to wait longer than cash customers, most food stamp users claimed to have experienced no discrimination when using stamps. Social workers expressed some concern over the constraints placed on relief clients and the potential stigma of stamps that publically marked consumers as poor, but ultimately they seemed to agree that it was a better program than what had preceded it.<sup>25</sup>

The volume of favorable national attention quickly created demand for program expansion. Individuals, businesses, and local organizations wrote to the Surplus Marketing Administration (SMA, which replaced the FSCC in 1940), recommending the Food Stamp Plan be extended to their town, or to working-class Americans not otherwise on welfare. By early 1941 formal requests for the Food Stamp Plan had been made by 1,500 communities, and the SMA had tested the idea of making the stamps available to those with low incomes but not otherwise on relief.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the plan's popularity may have derived from its apparently equitable treatment of the American poor. Welfare recipients were granted benefits without regard to their race, but local racial prejudices were not thoroughly challenged. The early Food Stamp Plan offered no specific guidelines on racial qualifications for applicants and kept limited

<sup>25</sup> Duffus, "In Place of Surplus," SM6. Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 82, 83.

<sup>26</sup> "Stamp Plan Shows the Way," 30–31.

statistics on the place of race in the program. Birmingham, Alabama, became the first test city for the plan with a high African American relief population, and when local food stamp applicants complained that the purchase requirement set by the SMA was too expensive, program administrators agreed to undermine many of their consumption goals and temporarily eliminate the requirement. While the federal program imagined African Americans as consumers whose participation in the program was not affected by race, it did not go out of its way to alter local-level discrimination. City-level work relief programs in the 1930s, for example, paid as little as twenty-five cents an hour, leading some workers to compare the payments to conditions under slavery. Purchasing food stamps on those wages was no easy feat. As participation in the Food Stamp Plan was typically based in participation in other relief programs, African American food stamp consumers were not spared the racism that was built into many local relief programs or that has been documented in federal programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). What the Food Stamp Plan did, however, was treat African American consumers like any other consumers to the extent of their participation in this one program.<sup>27</sup>

The plan also did not slot women into a lower channel of welfare benefits, as feminist scholars have shown to be true of other welfare programs. It instead reimaged women of lower-class households as consumerist middle-class housewives. The Food Stamp Plan did not reinforce the male-headed nuclear family unit by placing barriers between women and work in the way that Aid to Dependent Children did. The Food Stamp Plan assumed depression-era women were housewives, but it did not attempt to limit their paid work force participation so long as home duties were not neglected. The program also coalesced with other forms of relief; the food stamp user might be employed through the WPA or be on unemployment relief. Eligibility was based on being a low-income family, not from where (or from whom) that income came. The fact that it could be the "housewife's" WPA job or application for relief that made her family eligible for food stamps did not change her title in food stamp literature to anything other than "housewife." With blinders raised regarding the conditions of the women served, administrators of the Food Stamp Plan consistently described themselves as helping strengthen male-breadwinner nuclear families. In practice, however, women with children on Aid to Dependent Children, or women who worked relief jobs, could receive the same benefits as their male equivalents. The institutional prejudices that made fewer relief jobs available to women (and to African Americans) were not challenged, but the perception that consumers were typically female (ideally but not exclusively wives and mothers) made possible their receipt of benefits.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Agriculture Department Appropriations, *Agriculture Department Appropriation Bill for 1942*, 77 Cong., 1 sess., Jan. 8, 1941, p. 48. Robin D. G. Kelley, "A New War in Dixie: Communists and the Unemployed in Birmingham, 1930–1933," *Labor History*, 30 (Summer 1989), 375.

<sup>28</sup> On the gender inequalities of welfare programs, see Virginia Sapiro, "The Gender Basis of American Social Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, 101 (no. 2, 1986), 221–38; Gwendolyn Mink, "The Lady and the Tramp: Gender, Race, and the Origins of the American Welfare State," in *Women, the State, and Welfare*, ed. Linda Gordon (Madison, 1990), 92–123; Barbara Nelson, "Origins of the Two-Channel Welfare State: Workmen's Compensation and Mother's Aid," *ibid.*, ed. Gordon, 123–51; and Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890–1935* (New York, 1994). On plans that reinforced the male-headed household, see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York, 1993); and Joanne L. Goodwin, *Gender and the Politics of Welfare Reform: Mothers' Pensions in Chicago, 1911–1929* (Chicago, 1997). For an argument that increasing emphasis on consumption could damage lower-class families, see Susan Porter Benson, "Gender, Generation, and Consumption in the United States: Working-Class Families in the Interwar Period," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (New York, 1998), 226.

As politicians, businessmen, and social workers gathered behind this new program and its promise of transforming relief recipients into consumers buying through the normal channels and stimulating the economy, these supporters kept another reason for their enthusiasm a bit quieter: the program was also seen as an investment in quelling the discontent of the potentially restive poor. William Thatcher of the Farmers Union Grain Terminal Association (a large grain cooperative) strongly supported the stamp plan, not as a benevolent cause, but because alleviating hunger was a security measure for the nation: "All of us ought to try to be intelligent enough to conceive what [the end of the war] is going to bring, and if possible, to avoid what might be literally, a revolution in this country." He continued, "I am very serious . . . I think it is most important that we provide adequately for the . . . stamp plan, and encourage its usefulness and expansion." In an unusual allusion to hunger, Milo Perkins described the lack of vitamin-rich food available to low-income children as a dangerous risk that Americans were "taking with these children who need to be physically strong if they are to make their contribution to the democracy of tomorrow." Years before he entered the administration, Perkins, a successful Texas merchant, wrote about this issue for the *Nation*: "If the capitalists of the country don't wake up and use some of the brains which have been used to amass millions to work out the human problems which confront their fellow-Americans, then Mr. Roosevelt's opposition will come from the extreme left which wants to abolish the whole system, anyway." As president of the Surplus Marketing Administration, Perkins had the opportunity to quell this perceived threat from the far Left with a promise of aid to these "fellow-Americans." The Food Stamp Plan promised more than simply aid, though. Through this program, the poorest citizens would remain invested in—and would even be assisting—American capitalism. As relief recipients became "needy consumers," "relief consumers," or simply grouped together with other low-income consumers, policy shapers prayed this new class would use their increased purchasing power and updated titles to protect capitalism itself.<sup>29</sup>

Once implemented, the Food Stamp Plan offered an innovative new welfare model in which the relief recipient was to be understood as a consumer, or more precisely a member of a consuming nuclear family. This development promised a new conceptualization of poor Americans, one in which a family could theoretically escape stigma and receive benefits without negotiating racial quotas or explicit rules about gender roles. The reliefer and his family were to be consumers in the eyes of the state, and purchasing power promised to cross some gender and racial barriers at the same time it helped farmers, business, and capitalism. All advertisements and posed photographs of the program highlighted the program ideal of white families with a male breadwinner; even the nutrition science that determined how much money each family needed was based on families consisting of a man, a woman, and children. The consumer orientation of the program, however, allowed other welfare recipients such as female-headed households and African American families to sidestep the language of deserving and use program benefits. Single mothers were actually the most consistent food stamp users in most cities. Likewise, the presence of African American families was frequently erased, to the point that major statistical studies entirely

<sup>29</sup> On the relationship between consumerism and national belonging, see Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890–1945* (Chapel Hill, 2006). U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Agricultural Appropriations Bill for 1942*, 77 Cong., 1 sess., March 25, 1941, p. 356. Perkins, *Eating the Surplus*, 3. Perkins, "What Businessmen Think," 618.

omitted African American families on the program. It appears that no discussions of the program at the federal level, whether in speeches, legislation, or reports, refer to African Americans in the program. Although some journalists described African American families as poor consumers who spent all their stamps on pork instead of fruits and vegetables, the federal program strictly avoided differentiating consumers by race. While the ideal consumer family was white and nuclear, the idea of consumerism as a democratic ideology shaped the program's attempt to consider any family a consumer family.<sup>30</sup>

### Critiquing the Consumer Model

The consumer-oriented model of relief seemed to offer new opportunities and minimize stigma for relief recipients, and yet many recipients were displeased. While some newly dubbed "poor consumers" embraced the program, others protested the replacement of cash relief with coupon relief, the strict budgets designed for stamp users, and the limitations on who could participate. There was a strong correlation between this dissent and the type of local relief program in place before the Food Stamp Plan arrived. In areas that had offered little or no poverty relief, recipients tended to embrace the improvements of the Food Stamp Plan. In contrast, in areas where food stamps replaced unmonitored cash relief funds or otherwise represented a cut in benefits, food stamp users were more likely to protest. While some dissatisfied food stamp customers rejected the consumer element of the relief plan, such as the use of stamps and the requirement that recipients use grocery stores, others rejected the relief aspects, such as limitations on purchases and minimum buy-ins that distinguished it from true mass consumption.

Unlike most social provision programs, the Food Stamp Plan demanded recipients "buy" their relief, which bothered many who had previously been entitled to food relief without such a stipulation. Although food stamps allowed recipients the freedom to choose among surplus commodities and use the normal channels of grocery store shopping, the plan required them to pay a higher price than many intended to spend on food. Of eligible relievers who opted out of the program, 60 percent of New Yorkers and 39 percent of Baltimoreans gave the high purchase price as the reason for not participating. Because the Food Stamp Plan required a commitment to consumption illustrated through "buying" one's relief, some recipients rejected both the act of purchasing and, more commonly, the amount of stamps they were required to purchase before they could reap benefits. The social work researcher Joanna Colcord noted that "a few Italian clients" were particularly resistant to spending as much on food (\$1 per person per week) as the program required. Many found purchasing relief too pricy, others found it inconvenient and confusing.<sup>31</sup>

Bessie Garrod was among those relief consumers who found the minimum stamp purchase too pricy and did what many women unhappy with public policy in the depression era did—she wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt. This mother of eight explained her short-lived

<sup>30</sup> Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 28, 40; Don Wharton, "The Federal Food-Stamp Plan," *American Mercury*, 49 (April 1940), 478–79.

<sup>31</sup> "Digest of Report on Reasons for Non-Participation in the Food Stamp Plan in New York, N.Y.," Feb. 1942, folder 150-02, box 2, Records of the Food and Cotton Stamp Program, Correspondence of the Food Stamp Program, Records of the Surplus Marketing Administration. Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 83.

excitement over the Food Stamp Plan's arrival in the Bronx. She and her family lived on a small semi-monthly relief check, and her usual expenses went far beyond her means: school fees, a doctor's visit, and stockings for herself and her two teenage daughters were enough to break the bank. The Food Stamp Plan's requirement that participants pay for their orange stamps (or have the costs deducted from relief or WPA checks) struck her as absurd. "We, have at last, received the food stamp plan—But how different, the plan is, than the picture, we had visioned it to be." Garrod's tone grew increasingly irate in her seven-page letter as she recounted being told that the SMA mandated she set aside \$25 for two weeks of food stamps. Although this constituted half of her relief check, the Food Stamp Plan's economists had calculated that Garrod could afford \$25 for food as long as her other expenses conformed to what the economists had determined they should be. Garrod's rent, however, was \$16, \$2 more than what the economists had allowed for. Moreover, haircuts, school supplies, lunch monies, and bus fares were not factored into the federal economists' budgeting. "How, in the name of humanity, can we large families cope with these situations?" she asked, insinuating that the economists prescribing what she should do with her money did not know much about getting by on relief.<sup>32</sup>

The dissent regarding the purchase plan demonstrates the complexity of such a relief program. While the program aimed to create "consumers," those who chose not to go along with the plan's requirements were subjected to the same scrutiny as those using any public welfare program. The SMA investigated complaints about the program buy-in by sending researchers from the Department of Agriculture to New York City, Baltimore, and Memphis to determine why some eligible persons did not participate in the Food Stamp Plan. The resulting reports adamantly insisted that the problem was not the purchase requirement. The SMA maintained the necessity of a purchase requirement and blamed housewives such as Garrod for the program's shortcomings. Relief families who were unable to buy into the plan were not victims of the plan, but rather victims of inept housewives who could not effectively define their family relief budgets. While the Food Stamp Plan could turn participants into better consumers, it could not do so without their cooperation. The USDA researchers explained that even as eligible nonparticipants claimed they could not afford stamps, it was their economic priorities that posed the true impediment to their participation. The Food Stamp Plan aimed to create consumers and thus promised minimal stigma, but the hidden cost of this model was borne by participants who did not behave according to the program's singular vision of consumerism: these dissenters would be treated as unworthy relief recipients.<sup>33</sup>

For instance, these government researchers proved unwilling to understand why housewives such as Garrod would choose not to purchase food stamps. The researchers kept track of what relief clients bought, even issuing them journals in which they were to record every food item purchased or received as a gift (including food eaten at restaurants and delis, the sort of meals food stamps would not cover). Nonparticipants, the researchers concluded, spent as much money for restaurant meals and various shopping trips as it would cost for a month of food stamps. If they paid this sum for their stamps upfront,

<sup>32</sup> Bessie Garrod to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 10, 1941, box 90, Records of the Food and Cotton Stamp Program, Correspondence regarding the General Food Stamp Program, Records of the Surplus Marketing Administration.

<sup>33</sup> "Digest of Report on Reasons for Non-Participation in the Food Stamp Plan in New York."

and avoided the luxury of the deli counter, these nonparticipants could comfortably use the plan. The social scientific lenses through which these researchers viewed their subjects filtered out the clients' own explanations of their expenses and enabled the researchers to blame relief recipients' bad consumer skills for their refusal to join in the consumer program.

Researchers explaining why some people chose not to use stamps dismissively noted that "Often the 'reason' took the form of the client 'proving' to our investigators that after rent, utilities, medical, clothing, and other bills were paid the client just didn't have the sum of money. . . . *The conclusion is obvious. For at least 91 per cent of the sample studied in Baltimore, the reason 'minimum is too high' is not a valid one. Their own records show that.*" Nonparticipation was thus due either to "conscious falsification," an "honest, but wrong estimate by the client of his food expenditures," or an "unwillingness or inability of the client to budget." Reports recommended that low-income consumers receive more information about the program and about nutrition, thus shaping them into better consumers. The researchers did not mention the possibility of rethinking the purchase requirement. When food stamp users cooperated they could earn the benefits of a consumer program, but when they refused, the wrath they faced was that of a welfare program.<sup>34</sup>

Complaints about aspects of the program that were more "relief" than "consumer" transcended criticisms of pecuniary control. Some stamp clients worried about the elimination of cash or direct relief and the stigmatizing and burdensome effects of food stamps. The Workers' Alliance found the plan to be a sharp move away from the more liberal cash relief available in some places, though the group eventually changed its position and voiced support for the plan. A handful of elderly, sick, and disabled relief recipients found it inconvenient to purchase stamps, while some recipients of Old Age Assistance and Aid to Dependent Children explained their privacy was invaded because they had to let their grocer know they were receiving aid. One ex-grocer, now on relief, found it particularly threatening to reveal his relief status to his former colleagues. While there was much praise for transforming relief clients into consumers, the transformation was far from a complete one from the perspectives of relief clients.<sup>35</sup>

This gap between the reality of consumer relief and true, unfettered access to consumption is evident in the restrictions placed on food stamps. In moving stamp recipients through regular stores, the program did give these "consumers" access to increased amounts of money to spend. Their ability to purchase, however, was limited to certain items. Orange stamps, which represented a conversion of welfare recipients' own earnings into earmarked monies, ensured welfare recipients would use the plan's benefits only for groceries (including soap, starch, and basic household goods with agricultural origins) and not divert them toward debts, clothing, rent, or electricity. The Food Stamp Plan also limited the amount of money welfare recipients could spend on alcohol, tobacco, or luxuries such as prepared foods, imported foods, or deli sandwiches, by excluding these from food budgets. Blue stamps, the bonus stamps, could only be spent on selected surplus

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Information for Social Workers on the Food Stamp Plan," typescript, 1940?, p. 1, folder 120, box 1, Records of the Food and Cotton Stamp Program, Correspondence of the Food Stamp Program, Records of the Surplus Marketing Administration. Emphasis in original. I. Krechkevsky and Hans S. Erichson to Joseph D. Coppock, Aug. 2, 1941, *ibid.*, folder 170, box 2, Records of the Surplus Marketing Administration.

<sup>35</sup> Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 83.

crops. As such they acted as “earmarked monies,” which provide, argues Viviana A. Zelizer, a paternalistic means of teaching appropriate consumption to the poor. The program sought not only to craft consumers but to shape specific patterns of consumption as well.<sup>36</sup>

One of these patterns, which again suggests how assumptions about welfare recipients and relief shaped this consumer-focused program, is the relationship of male consumers to the plan. When plan developers imagined the ideal unit of consumption that would take part in the plan, they imagined a heterosexual family with a female shopper. This idea allowed women, even single mothers, to claim equal and nonstigmatized, albeit wholly gender-specific, treatment by the welfare state. This obsession with the consuming family, however, put single men at a disadvantage and left them out of the consumer welfare model. While men who worked for the WPA or collected unemployment insurance were at first eligible, the program expected that the food preparation work would be done by a woman. As Michael Willrich has demonstrated, the family-orientation of the welfare state led to a peripheral, punitive place for single women *and* single men. The surveys designed by the Surplus Marketing Administration suggested that single men were inadequate participants in the program. In Rochester, New York, one of the most common reasons offered by relief recipients for abstaining from the Food Stamp Plan was their inability to cook. Persons using Aid to the Blind and Old Age Assistance were substantially less likely to participate in the Food Stamp Plan than those using Aid to Dependent Children or employed by the WPA. The SMA interpreted this trend as evidence that the unattached men who disproportionately populated the groups receiving aid for the blind and the elderly were unable to cook, rather than as evidence that the blind and elderly might just cook less frequently than young laborers or than women with small children. Social workers reinforced this image, especially in notes and memos that recorded that single men did not cook and therefore did not use stamps.<sup>37</sup>

Families were, in fact, more likely to participate in the Food Stamp Plan than were single individuals. In Rochester in 1939, 32 percent of single WPA workers purchased stamps, while 65 percent of those in two-person households did. In Dayton, 47 percent of single workers bought stamps, while 74 percent of those in two-person households did. The SMA argued that these disparities were caused in part by differences in cooking facilities and used these numbers to justify eliminating access to the program for individuals outside normative families. The agency noted that many single people “do not maintain their own households and therefore find it impossible to use the blue stamps for the purchase of unprepared food.” The SMA then explained that it had taken steps to require that participation be “restricted to persons who have household facilities to utilize the commodities.” Rather than investigate each household, the SMA simply barred single people from the Food Stamp Plan in 1940. At the same time that the Department of Agriculture

<sup>36</sup> For a transcript of a speech given by Milo Perkins in May 1939, see Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, *The Food Stamp Plan: Why It Is Being Tried Out and How It Will Work in Rochester* (Washington, 1939), 3. Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies* (Princeton, 1997), 124, 168.

<sup>37</sup> On the gendered imagination of the welfare state, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (New York, 2001). Michael Willrich, “Home Slackers: Men, the State, and Welfare in Modern America,” *Journal of American History*, 87 (Sept. 2000), 461. Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 31. Colcord, “Stamps to Move the Surplus,” 306.

was emphasizing the ease of modern cooking for housewives, it cast this type of labor and any benefits associated with it as beyond the domain of single men.<sup>38</sup>

The problem was not only that modern single men could not cook but also that unattached men were untrustworthy characters divorced from a desirable family organization. These single men may have even deserted their wives and children, a common enough practice in the depression. Since the late nineteenth century, reformers have worried that giving aid to deserted women would only encourage “cowardly” men to desert their wives. Deserted women should not be treated as deserving widows, these reformers argued, but as any other morally suspect single mother. Eventually Jewish reform groups in New York City organized an antidesertion league to keep these deserted women from becoming a burden on the community. The fear of widespread desertion and the desire to discourage men from leaving may have fueled the decision to cut single people from the food stamp program.<sup>39</sup>

An even more likely factor in that decision was that single men were associated with cheating the system. That this association existed is clear both in the letters single men wrote to the SMA to protest the cut and in the replies they received. Men wrote explaining that they wanted access to the food. Henry Oberst, an unmarried man in New York explained: “It does not seem fair to bar a veteran and a citizen from the food stamp plan, because he is unattached, because after all an unattached person can use the surplus commodities as well as those with dependents.” He noted that he used butter and oranges even without any cooking facilities. John McAnorney of Brooklyn, also a veteran, asked the FSCC to create a way to include the particularly deserving category of single veterans in the program. Israel Convisser, the welfare chairman of the American Labor party in Brooklyn, wrote to the SMA on behalf of the relief client John Samaras. Convisser asked why the man could not use stamps for butter, fruit, and eggs that his neighbor sometimes cooked for him. The chairman suggested that the program offer special stamps to the unattached, good only for fruit, butter, and eggs, explaining, “it is a small imposition upon a neighbor to have a couple of eggs boiled.”<sup>40</sup>

The SMA’s representative completely skirted the question of what men could or could not prepare and jumped immediately into a discussion of how single men might cheat. “While there is no implication in any specific case that the Secretary’s regulation and conditions would be violated by a client without cooking facilities, experience has shown that when the plan includes a large number of such cases a large proportion of the stamps are spent for nonagricultural purposes.” The use of blue stamps for nonagricultural purposes was not permitted in the program guidelines and required the illegal trading or selling of stamps. Even without specific evidence of such chiseling by the unattached, policy makers assumed a link between single men and cheating in the program. The apparent unwillingness of anyone in authority to consider Convisser’s suggestion of special stamps for the unattached further illustrates

<sup>38</sup> Gold, Hoffman, and Waugh, *Economic Analysis of the Food Stamp Plan*, 30, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Anna R. Igra, *Wives without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1930–1935* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 30–31.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Oberst to Surplus Marketing Administration, April 6, 1941, box 90, Records of the Food and Cotton Stamp Program, Correspondence regarding the General Food Stamp Program, Records of the Surplus Marketing Administration. John McAnorney to Department of Agriculture, Feb. 28, 1941, *ibid.* Israel Convisser to John McAuliffe, Sept. 19, 1940, *ibid.*

the SMA's investment in crafting relief consumers with familial and middle-class consumption habits.<sup>41</sup>

The plan was thus part consumer stimulus and part relief, and its incredible popularity as well as the vehement criticism it received resulted from this combination. The food stamp program distributed surplus goods while moving the poor through consumer channels, offering liberal choice and minimizing stigma. Yet the critiques of the plan highlighted the difficulty of straddling the goals of consumption and relief. Clients who had once received benefits in-kind or cash relief distrusted a consumer system that required they pay for their welfare, and thus reveal their poverty to their fellow shoppers. Even more critical, however, were the complaints about the relief-oriented aspects of the program. While people in the program were dubbed "relief consumers," their consumer habits were held to a level of scrutiny more in line with their relief status. Similarly, the stamps served as restricted or "earmarked" money, as being relief recipients still connoted poor money management, criminality, and behavior ill-suited to the modern, rational consumer. Most notably, single men could not fit into the imagined mold of this new consumer, and as a result were cut from both consumer and food welfare benefits. The relief consumer had the potential to shape the depression economy, but only to the extent that the relief consumer allowed himself or herself to be reshaped.

### Considering the Legacy of Food Stamps

The end of the Food Stamp Plan in 1943 was attributable not to its shortcomings but rather to World War II. Agricultural products, no longer surpluses, were going to feed Allied soldiers and a vast European market. Americans traded the abundance symbolized by food stamps for the sacrifice of ration tickets. While several politicians in the immediate postwar period worked to revive food stamps, using a human rights justification, the increasingly powerful image of Americans as a middle-class society quieted the political threat of a mistreated underclass. No one had to coax Americans to increase consumption when it was on their own terms, and as goods became cheaper and incomes rose by the 1950s, mainstream political agendas deemphasized issues of poverty and malnutrition. Food stamps were not fully revived for almost twenty years.<sup>42</sup>

Despite this apparently short life, however, food stamps were not forgotten by politicians, social workers, or even their former recipients, who continued to request them through the war and beyond. More than the stamps themselves, however, it is the recipient-to-consumer model of welfare that proved most instrumental in changing how Americans thought about social provisions. The model lived on in a number of ventures. Serious plans were made for cotton stamps, which would have used the same method of distribution as food stamps to help relief recipients purchase clothes, mattresses, and linens made with cotton that might otherwise be plowed under by farmers. The cotton stamp plan began in May 1940 with a green and brown stamp system that mimicked food stamps and with a special consumption boost promised to dry goods merchants. The cost of turning this raw cotton into consumer goods, however, was so high that the program ultimately proved

<sup>41</sup> Chief of Purchase and Distribution Division to Kris P. Bemis and McAuliffe, Oct. 10, 1940, *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *The National Food Allotment Plan* (Washington, 1944).

unfeasible. While the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation intended to create federal relief jobs for their manufacturing needs, estimates suggested that the plan would cost the government \$250 to move a single bale of cotton. While cotton stamps were a federal idea, average American citizens, inspired by the Food Stamp Plan, suggested new models following that of the Food Stamp Plan, including one for medical care. *Business Week* proposed a plan that would offer poor consumers stamps for processed foods. The first ten years of the most recent food stamp plan, signed into law in 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, continued the process of requiring relief recipients to purchase their stamps in exchange for “bonus” stamps. The 1964 Food Stamp Act declares in its first paragraph that it exists for “food assistance to be operated through normal channels of trade.” This plan continued to exclude alcohol, tobacco, and imported foods, and it replaced all free distribution of food-stuffs with stamps for purchase. This buy-in requirement remained until the mid-1970s. The 1964 Food Stamp Act thus took many elements directly from its 1939 predecessor, most notably its dedication to consumer-oriented relief.<sup>43</sup>

The most important outcome of the 1939 plan was the unique pairing of consumer politics and welfare clients. In the late New Deal, policy makers embraced Keynesian spending in many aspects of government, including welfare policy. From this new approach came a new designation of the welfare recipient as a consumer. As a consumer, the low-income citizen was allowed benefits but not entitled to them—benefits came, quite literally, with a price. The Food Stamp Plan illustrates the ascendance of the consumer mentality in modern America, which would fully mature after World War II. The responses to the program, especially ones from poor consumers, also reveal the dark side of this consumer program. The expectations that came with consumer welfare left some men out of the picture, replaced claims to entitlements with a requirement of “buying in,” and encouraged the micromanagement of food stamp users’ funds. In time these aspects of relief would seem natural: by the late 1960s welfare rights activists demanded access to chain stores’ credit cards instead of exploitive installment purchasing plans and inflated prices at local stores. The conceptualization of welfare recipients as consumers, however, and the idea that the poorest of the poor could buy their relief and thus claim a destigmatized place in the polity, come out of these early food stamp negotiations. The framing of food stamps as a consumer program appears neither to “subvert the social order” nor to “integrate classes into one nation,” as broader examinations of consumption have suggested, but this framing did influence the social order for those at the bottom of it. As historians continue to analyze the twentieth century as the century of consumption, we must take care to evaluate how the most low-income of low-income consumers fit into consumer politics, as well as how American social provisions were altered under the aegis of consumption.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> “Cotton Stamps Hailed,” *National Grocers Bulletin*, May 25, 1940, p. 34. Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation, *Report of the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation for the Fiscal Year 1940*, 5. “Cotton Stamps Next,” *Business Week*, Feb. 10, 1940, p. 17. “Stamps for the Doctor: Extension of Food Plan to Medical Care Is Suggested,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1940, p. 72. “Poor Will Get U.S. Food Stamps,” 16. Jeffrey M. Berry, *Feeding Hungry People: Rulemaking in the Food Stamp Program* (New Brunswick, 1984). Food Stamp Act of 1964, HR 10222, 88 Cong., 2 sess., pp. 1–2.

<sup>44</sup> Felicia Kornbluh, “To Fulfill Their ‘Rightly Needs’: Consumerism and the National Welfare Rights Movement,” *Radical History Review*, 69 (Fall 1997), 82. Matthew Hilton and Martin Daunton, “Material Politics: An Introduction,” in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, ed. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (New York, 2001), 3.