



## Albert Coates: Membership Dues in the Depression

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Howard Covington's biography of Albert Coates continues to reveal fascinating (at least to me) moments from our history. In the budget roundtables I talk about the importance of local government membership dues, including whether payments will decline this coming fiscal year. So it was timely to read this weekend about our early efforts in 1936 and 1937 to collect membership dues.

Coates initially had asked individual officials to pay membership dues to the Institute. It produced almost nothing because people had very little money. The idea for "unit memberships" apparently came from a city manager who wrote to Coates about the possibility of a single rate that would "cover all of the Institute's publications rather than a charge for each guidebook or report." Coates agreed that member units would receive "all the guidebooks, a subscription to *Popular Government*, the legislative bulletins, and access to the Institute staff who were available to answer questions." This may have been the beginning of our present-day commitment to advising—it is not clear whether they answered questions for the majority of local units that were not dues-paying members.

Dillard Gardner was one of the Institute's original staff members, and Coates sent him all across North Carolina in 1936 to sell memberships to cities and counties. "He would arrive in a county and not leave until he had contacted every municipality as well as all available county officials." Gardner's detailed reports described "depression commissioners" who were struggling in many communities. According to Gardner, "The rest of the state may be 'looking up' but these three [county commissioners] are certainly watching the dimes. When I finally have to say '\$130.00' they practically have heart failure. It would be easier to sell ice cream cones at the Arctic Circle than the Institute in Cleveland." Against these long odds, "Gardner enrolled more than 100 cities, towns, and counties as dues-paying members." My hope is that many more local governments will continue paying their membership dues next year even as they struggle with their own financial challenges.