

*Turning Coal to Diamond: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Arthurdale  
Subsistence Housing Project*

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**Abstract:** In 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt (ER), the First Lady of the United States, initiated a subsistence housing project, Arthurdale, funded by the federal government to help a poor coal mining town in West Virginia rise above poverty. ER spotlighted subsistence housing as a promising venture for poor American workers to develop economic stability and community unification. She encountered harsh pushback from the federal government, the American public, and private industries. Deemed communistic and excessively expensive, Arthurdale pushed the boundaries of federal government involvement in community organization. Bureaucratic and financial issues impacted the community's employment rates, income, and community cooperation. ER persisted, perhaps too blindly, until the federal government declared the project a failure and pulled out to avoid further financial losses. ER's involvement in Arthurdale's administration and bureaucracy radically shifted the role of the First Lady, a position with no named responsibilities or regulations. Before ER, First Ladies never exercised authority in federally regulated projects and rarely publicly presented their opinions. Did ER's involvement in Arthurdale hinder or promote the project's success? Should a First Lady involve herself in federal policy? If so, how much authority should she possess?

“Nothing we do in this world is ever wasted and I have come to the conclusion that practically nothing we ever do stands by itself. If it is good, it will serve some good purpose in the future. If it is evil, it may haunt us and handicap our efforts in unimagined ways”

–Eleanor Roosevelt 1961

**Crushing Poverty in West Virginia**

In the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, industrialization developed in the United States, necessitating a demand for coal. After the Civil War, venture capitalists began purchasing large amounts of land in the mountainous region of West Virginia. Originally, West Virginia's inhabitants supported themselves through intense commercial and subsistence agriculture, but the peak of industrialization, fueled by World War I, capitalized on the natural richness of West Virginia's coal and timber. The deforestation and creation of coalmines devastated the land, leading to a scarcity of fertile plots. Therefore, men turned to coal mining to provide income for their families. In the 1920s, coal industries monopolized the land and large groups of immigrants moved into poor mining towns. The population of these towns increased by 1000% between 1870 and 1930 (Cahill 1999). As the economy began to crash in the late 1920s due to economic

difficulties and the fluctuating demand on coal, many families descended into poverty due to unemployment, heavy periods of drought, and lack of food resources (Cahill 1999).

During the Great Depression, poverty increased alarmingly. The cruel winters left families “huddled in their shacks literally down to their last shirt and their last sack of corn, waiting for the revival of an industry which on its past scale may never return” (Cahill 1999, 38). Scott’s Run, a poor mining community along a creek, demonstrated the most grueling poverty. A local journalist described it as “the damndest cesspool of human misery...in America” (Cook 1992, 130). Charity organizations responded by sending food, water, blankets, and seed packets. Volunteers taught technical skills such as sewing and garden farming to incentivize subsistence farming, which is farming for household consumption. Despite some success with gardening, 41% of the community lived on relief and an estimated 95% of children suffered from illness in 1933 (Haid 1975). The coal miners struggled to beat the brutal cycle of poverty.

Agitated by their economic deprivation and low wages, some coal miners resorted to violence and political dissent. The National Miners Union struck out, organizing protests and picketing, to force employers to raise wages. In 1932, a labor union staged a riot that resulted in one death and nine injuries from gunshot wounds fired by mine owner James Paisley’s guards. Tensions heightened as Communist sympathies spread. Rallies, riots and protests signaled the blight and dejection of the coal miners’ lives. An estimated 40% of the region’s union members backed Communist ideals (Haid 1975). In August of 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt drove herself to Scott’s Run and witnessed the destitute conditions of the mining population. She feared “a people’s revolution” could lead to similar circumstances as the turbulent Russian Revolution of 1917. (Roosevelt 1961, 177; History.com Editors 2009). ER left determined to enact change and prevent the threat of communism.

### **Eleanor Roosevelt’s Personal Life**

Born in 1884 to an affluent family, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) suffered tragedies early in her life. By age 10, her mother, father, and younger brother died, and she moved to her grandmother’s house. ER described herself as afraid, socially awkward, shy, and dedicated to schoolwork. ER’s grandmother shipped her to Europe during her adolescent years to break Eleanor out her comfort zone. Upon return to the United States at age 17, her wealthy family pushed her into the upper echelons of society. Service and social justice issues interested ER during this period. She taught dance classes to poor children and investigated working conditions in garment factories (Hoffman 2001).

In 1905, she married Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and moved into a home controlled by her mother-in-law. She remarks, “as young women go, I suppose I was fitting pretty well into the pattern of a conventional, quiet young society matron” (Roosevelt 1961, 55). Between 1906 and 1916, she gave birth to six children and desired to live independently from her mother-in-law. In 1910, she helped FDR with his political campaign for state senator and realized “that something within me craved to be an individual” (Roosevelt 1961, 65). She attended hearings and discussions at the Capital and met Louis Howe, a future partner of the Arthurdale program and supporter of FDR. Howe and ER developed a close relationship, with Howe fostering ER’s political interests by encouraging her to write newspaper columns and involve herself in national service and political organizations. ER grew accustomed to the busyness and expectations of politics. Around 1918, she discovered an affair between FDR and Lucy Mercer, ER’s personal secretary. While this news crushed her, she decided not to divorce FDR. Recently grieving the death of a child and recovering from the birth of her children, ER wished to keep her family together and avoid social

stigma. Shouldering the private burden, she threw herself into volunteer work at hospitals to support the war effort. Disgusted by low wages for hospital workers, she petitioned Congress for reform. About her service experience ER remarked, “I had gained...knowledge that there is joy in accomplishing a good job. I knew more about the human heart” (Roosevelt 1961, 93). Her volunteerism allowed her to discover her passion for serving the common citizens of America.

During the early years of FDR’s political career, ER balanced writing for newspapers, radio broadcasting, caring for her polio-ridden husband, and working for the League of Women Voters, the Women’s Trade Union League, and the Democratic State Committee. She developed a vast network of political friends and started a furniture factory named Val-Kill in Hyde Park, NY, with Nancy Cook, an women’s rights activist and craft specialist. ER funded the factory using her own inheritance and earnings from radio work. It aimed to provide locals with handicraft jobs and revive the art of handmaking wooden furniture. In 1932, ER campaigned furiously for her husband’s presidency, but expressed deep internal conflict about potentially becoming the First Lady. She admitted, “This meant the end of any personal life of my own. I knew what traditionally should lie before me...and I cannot say that I was pleased at the prospect. By earning my own money, I had recently enjoyed a certain amount of financial independence and had been able to do things which I was personally interested” (Roosevelt 1961, 163). FDR’s presidential victory in 1933 catapulted ER into a new way of life.

As First Lady, ER attended to the many guests the White House welcomed every day. Dramatically different from her previous political and social work, her schedule now revolved around tea, luncheons, and planning social events. She continued to write newspaper columns and oversaw the management of the White House but hated the formality and social grace the job demanded. ER expressed, “The First lady is like the prisoner of history in the White House...here she is not herself at all, but the wife of the President of the United States, doing the things which the country expects this woman to do” (Winfield 1990, 703). Traditionally Secret Service agents accompanied the First Lady on all outings, but ER insisted on driving her own car and freely seeing to her business. She denied the Secret Service agent so often Howe gave her a gun for the car and hired a bodyguard to train her. Always intent on asserting her independence and fighting for human rights, the First Lady quickly became involved with the Arthurdale housing project after seeing the conditions in Scotts Run during her 1933 visit.

### **Laying the Foundations of Arthurdale**

As a writer and political activist, ER knew the importance of national media in reaching the mass public; in the *Women’s Democratic News* column, ER wrote a charged statement describing her experiences in Scott’s Run, explaining:

I do not believe if most of us knew the conditions under which some of our brothers and sisters were living that we would rest complacently until we had registered the fact that in this country the day is past when we will continue to live under any governmental system which will produce conditions such as exist in certain industries and in certain parts of our country (Cook 1992, 132).

Unlike previous First Ladies, ER publicly asserted her opinion about society’s failings. *The New York Times* often berated ER’s outspokenness believing, “The President’s wife must be a silent partner. The unwritten law is that the First Lady gives no interviews, makes no public utterance” (Hager 1932, 5). Pre-Roosevelt First Ladies participated in politics, but often limited their public

opinions and mainly focused on serving the White House. For example, Calvin Coolidge, President from 1923 to 1929, forbid his wife Grace Coolidge from speaking publicly. ER's journalism opened America's eyes to the life of the First Lady and set a precedent for activism and outspokenness. Her advocacy drew the public's attention to the deep poverty of West Virginia. From this point forward, ER dedicated an immense amount of her time, energy and savings to the improvement of the Scott's Run community (Hoffman 2001).

ER immediately turned to her network of friends to garner financial support and appeal for the dignity of the coal miners. The First Lady evoked the pathos of her wealthy friends by telling a story about a young boy's pet rabbit whom his sister threatened, saying "He thinks we are not going to eat it, but we are" (Cook 1992, 132). A sympathetic supporter of ER sent \$100 to save the rabbit. The First Lady's fearful discussions about how communist principles incited workers to rebel against the nation's government stirred people to action. ER's social connections and fundraising persuasion techniques enabled her to raise awareness for the plight of the families and convince her husband, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to initiate a subsistence housing program for the Scott's Run community (Cook 1992).

The subsistence housing idea came at the opportune time to take advantage of the United States' Back to the Land Movement. A subsistence homestead, defined by federal policy, "consists of a modern but inexpensive house and outbuildings, located on a plot of land upon which a family may produce a considerable portion of the food required for home consumption" (Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation 1935, 6). The romantic appeal of living off Earth's natural bounty led many families to migrate from urban centers to rural homes in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Subsistence housing, initiated by New Deal policies, became an easy way for citizens to participate in the Back to the Land Movement. Initially funded by the federal government and designed with the intent of agricultural and economic self-sufficiency, subsistence housing communities would incorporate the perks of both city and country lifestyles (Gast 1934). Ross Gast, Special Representative of the newly developed Division of Subsistence Homesteads, promised these communities would foster economic security and combine community agricultural practices with new industrial advantages (Gast 1934). The federal government and FDR hoped these programs would empower impoverished families to cooperate with each other democratically and forgo individualism for community success. When ER approached FDR about establishing a subsistence community for the Scott's Run area, FDR firmly backed project because of a long-held passion for rural planning sparked during his governorship of New York. He remarked in his inaugural address: "we must frankly recognize the overbalance of population in our industrial centers and, by engaging on a national scale in a redistribution, endeavor to provide a better use of the land for those best fitted for the land" (Haid 1975, 55). Rural planning, including subsistence housing, became a key component of FDR's reform campaigns. The project's leaders and the President believed subsistence farming gave the nation a viable opportunity to reimagine modern life.

Upon FDR's prompting, John Bankhead, an Alabama senator interested in the Back to the Land Movement, created three subsistence housing bills for Congress. Two bills promised \$400 million to support a national program, but they found little favor on Capitol Hill. Congress finally agreed to apportion \$25 million for the development of subsistence housing communities under the National Recovery Act passed to fund FDR's New Deal policies. The bill stipulated that the President could use the money to directly purchase homesteads (Haid 1975). In 1933, under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, led by Harold Ickes, congress created the National Advisory Committee on Subsistence Homesteads managed by M.L. Wilson, a prominent supporter

of the Back to the Land Movement. Wilson named ER and Louis Howe to an advisory committee under Ickes and himself (Haid 1975).

Wilson intended for the communities to have autonomy, only minimally appealing to the federal government for major changes. He argued, "Such communities must take local root and grow; they cannot be superimposed from national headquarters" (Haid 1975, 193). He called for the creation of local organization headed by the homesteaders and overseen by a Board of Directors. Under Wilson's guidance, the homesteaders would gain membership in the organization and stakes in the administration of the community once they paid all mortgages and officially owned the homes. These guidelines would theoretically incentivize the homesteaders to unify and subsequently the organization would decentralize the federal government's role. Ickes, on the other hand, envisioned the federal government controlling the projects. Wilson protested saying, "Mrs. Roosevelt was a great community person, and she believed that since these units were small, since they were experimental, there must be a maximum amount of local interest and local initiative in them" (Haraven 1968, 98). To Wilson and ER's dismay, Ickes and the President handed the power to the federal government in 1934. Every change and decision, even trivial details like personal fencing around the homes, had to pass through the federal government's hands before being sanctioned for the communities.

In the Division of Subsistence Homesteads' official bulletin, Ickes detailed the necessary steps for the goals, planning, and administration of experimental subsistence homestead communities. Planned projects must meet "local need" and possess "the presence of various factors essential to the project's success" (Lord and Johnson 1942, 184-185). It detailed how agricultural and architectural experts must sign off on the location of the project and its engineering. Each house would cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000 depending on the size of the community (Lord and Johnson 1942). A manager hired by the Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation would lead the project. Only families with cash incomes and proper work ethics could be considered for the project. The federal government specifically sought to promote decentralization of large industry cities, encourage economic stability, and increase community welfare (Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation 1935). The government hoped subsistence homestead projects would bolster families during economic stress because they could produce their own food and not solely rely upon money from wage employment. Research demonstrated that subsistence farming could decrease the family's cost of living up to 30% (Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation 1935). The bulletin emphasized, "It took only the impact of economic stress to strike the names of thousands upon thousands of these workers off the pay roles and write them on the relief rolls" (Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation 1935, 8). The government hoped subsistence housing could decentralize industry and prevent future economic depressions.

After the passage of the National Recovery Act, ER and Howe hired West Virginia University faculty specializing in subsistence farming to identify a tract of land best suitable for the community. The administration purchased a 1,028-acre farm for \$45,000 near Scott's Run owned by Richard Arthur. Simply named Arthurdale, this land became the fertile breeding ground for America's first "demonstration project" (Haid 1975, 74). ER sought to create a social community experiment fueled by homesteaders' community leadership (Cook 1992, 137). She championed subsistence farming as a "new self-supporting manner of American living," hoping it ensured basic human necessities and facilitated positive social cooperation (Black 1999, 24). An ideal subsistence community pushed individuals to gain economic stability and prosperity from mutual assistance and honest morality. ER envisioned Arthurdale as a model for all subsequent programs.

### **The Selection Committee**

In October of 1933, a selection committee met to pick homesteaders. All participants of the project recognized that the success or failure of Arthurdale signaled the fate of the subsistence housing program. The selection committee consisted of social workers from West Virginia University; the committee blocked ER's participation until the final round to avoid her bias because she personally knew some of the applicants. The committee sought to choose families well versed in agriculture and likely to succeed in creating economic security. Therefore, the committee demanded homesteaders demonstrate "a much higher quality of intelligence, perseverance and foresight...than communities which are to follow" (Haid 1975, 75).

The lengthy process included an eight-page survey and interviews designed to determine the character, intelligence, work ethic, poise, and grit of the applicants. Applicants found the long process bothersome, but worth the trouble for a chance to escape poverty (Haid 1975). Clarence Pickett, an advisor for Arthurdale, recalled, "It was not the idea that Arthurdale should be a community of saints, but neither did the University committee feel justified in offering the opportunity to persons whose lack of moral character was likely to jeopardize their ability to contribute to the venture" (Haid 1975, 75). The social workers drilled applicants on their farming knowledge, spiritual views, and physical fitness abilities. In the government's eyes, the success of the community depended greatly on the types of families that could pave the way for Arthurdale's victory (Haid 1975).

Through ER's encouragement, hundreds of families in the Scott's Run region applied for the program. The spread of industrialization and demand for low wage laborers made the Scott's Run community very diverse compared to more urban, middle-class regions of West Virginia. Foreign-born immigrants constituted 60% of the community and African Americans comprised 20% of the community (Cook 1992, 138). ER personally prompted over 200 immigrants and African Americans to apply, but white Americans' political, social, and cultural attitude in the late 1920s and early 1930s discriminated against these populations. Protests held by white community members occurred against allowing foreign born and African American citizens to participate in the program (Hoffman 2001).

Ultimately, the committee chose white, Christian mining families to represent the first participants. While poor, they did not constitute the most impoverished in the community. ER angrily demanded the consideration of African American and foreign families, but received three reasons for their exclusion: the probable "loss of respect we have gained," the expensive establishment of separate<sup>1</sup> churches and schools, and the fact that "those who are clamoring for admission are not Negroes, but are of mixed blood and far inferior to the real Negroes" (Hoffman 2001, 23). The head of the committee reasoned:

We isolated all the colored people we had registered and all foreigners...we found that while the colored people were easy to work with and pliable, they did not make much of an effort on their own count and the foreigners were even worse in this respect than the colored people (Haid 1975, 79).

The blatant racism and classism of the selection committee fell out of ER's hands because of the reliance on federal funding. The federal government's heavy hand on the project ensured

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<sup>1</sup> Up until *Brown v Board of Education*'s reversal of *Plessy v Ferguson* in 1954, the United States still upheld the "separate but equal" court ruling (*Plessy v. Ferguson* 1896) Therefore, during the time of Arthurdale, the government required the establishment of separate facilities for blacks and whites.

their regulations were priority. The First Lady grappled with the controversy, believing “an ordinary community contains people of every type of ability and character” (Hoffman 2001, 21). Supporting the project would help a community defeat poverty and demonstrate new community living for the United States, but also perpetuate inequality and racism. ER tried to make up for the prejudice, organizing a summit of black leaders at the White House to discuss their rights and the establishment of a separate subsistence housing community. ER devised plans to counter the discrimination, but the Division of Subsistence Homesteads gave it little attention. Ultimately, the First Lady reluctantly proceeded with the committee’s selections, following the majority’s decision, and construction began on the first 50 houses (Haid 1975).

### **Building Arthurdale**

Originally, the federal government projected to spend \$2,000 on each family household. Each family would receive two to five acres of land, a garden space, a fully furnished house and livestock. The homesteaders enthusiastically worked on the construction of the community, like a modern-day Habitat for Humanity project. A working homesteader shared, “they used their picks and shovels with more energy than was ever used by them in loading coal in the mines” (Haid 1975, 83). The government first planned to construct the homes and then additional buildings for community activities. The new promise of success filled the atmosphere with hope and hard work.

ER desired to provide the best house and modern amenities to all the households. When Howe suggested he purchase the housing, ER said “Louis, don’t be absurd” (Cook 1992, 134). ER ordered Howe not to make any decisions while she journeyed for a period, but Howe disobeyed her orders and ordered Cape Cod style homes that were best suitable for summer vacationers, not populations subjected to the cruel winters of the Appalachia region (Cook 1992). Howe reassured an angry ER of his decision under the pretense that the homes could sufficiently house the families; ER felt a sense of loyalty to Howe, for he influenced her greatly in the 1920s to start writing and pursuing social justice reform. When the homes arrived for construction the architects found them flimsy and they failed to fit the concrete foundations because of ineffective communications about their size (Cook 1992). Workers ripped out all previous plumbing and heating, resulting in massive financial costs. The First Lady blamed herself for not canceling the houses or advising the communications between the architects and the federal government. The homesteaders anxiously awaited their new homes, working hard every week at Arthurdale to build their utopia.

Costs continued to increase when ER ordered that all households have indoor plumbing, heaters, new linens, kitchen supplies, wooden furniture, spacious closets, refrigerators, pine floors, landscaped yards, hog houses, smokestacks, and a plethora of other luxuries that most of modern America lacked (Haid 1975). ER poured time and heart into making the houses feel like homes. After ER’s spending, each house cost \$8,550, far above the limit Ickes planned (Haid 1975). Ickes claimed he worried constantly about the skyrocketing prices and ER’s role in the Arthurdale project. Several times ER overstepped Ickes authority, for example to demand refrigerators for the homesteaders. Ickes genuinely believed ER “has a fine social sense and is utterly unselfish”, but the rising prices made him bitter about the success of the project (Cook 1992, 136). Appalled at the tremendous spending, FDR told Ickes, “My Missus, unlike most women, hasn’t any sense about money at all” (Cook 1992, 136). ER persuaded FDR and the federal government to excuse her excess spending because the homes inspired hard work and positivity among the homesteaders. Every homesteader found themselves transported from poverty’s door step to paradise. One homesteader explained, “It was like dying and going to heaven” (Hoffman 2001, 24).

### **Backlash Against Arthurdale**

Critics immediately lashed out at the exuberant prices of Arthurdale, claiming the money could provide other impoverished regions with subsistence housing and relief. A *Chicago Tribune* article implied Arthurdale's corruption, saying it was "as lavish as Tammany Hall"<sup>2</sup> (Bennett 1934, 6). To waste such an extreme amount of money on trivial details while the nation struggled to rise from the Great Depression seemed foolish. In 1934, Journalist Wesley Stout investigated Arthurdale's development and wrote a critical article in *The Saturday Evening Post* detailing the unnecessary use of tax payers' money (Stout 1934). A *Harper's Magazine* article, berated subsistence housing as "permanent poverty," citing evidence that private businesses forced the homesteaders to pay wages to create factories, therefore decreasing the chances of the homesteaders' "economic security" (Ware and Powell 1935). A barrage of backlash continually followed the development of the project, tainting its reputation and inspiring Congress to cut funding.

Other subsistence communities received similar rebukes, but the First Lady's major involvement at Arthurdale attracted considerable attention to the project. In an era where First Ladies balanced their individuality "without overshadowing" their "distinguished husband[s]," ER's influential presence at Arthurdale signaled a departure from traditional standards (Winfield 1990, 702). Deemed her "pet project," journalists asserted that ER created a Communist community to destroy capitalism (Hoffman 2001, 93). ER took the brunt of the criticisms, saying, "I do not understand how he considers it Communistic to give people a chance to earn their own livings and to buy their own houses" (Cook 1992, 144). The First Lady relentlessly defended the project by capitalizing on its future possibilities and the fact that each homesteader paid and worked to achieve their goals. ER knew the potential of the homesteaders and wrote in April of 1934 that "there is hope that this program will solve the difficulties of a good many people throughout our country who are now suffering from unemployment or the inability to better the poor standards of living imposed on them by slums and congested areas" (Roosevelt 1961, 26). ER stressed that Arthurdale taught the nation about the dignity of the American worker and the importance of community. Labeling the project as an experiment allowed ER and Howe to justify the faults as trial-and-error techniques and push the project forward.

### **The Creation of a Community**

By June 1934, Arthurdale officially opened. In ER's speech to the first 50 homesteaders she passionately explained:

I know there are going to be hard times, but if you work together I am sure you will succeed not only for yourselves but for what it will mean to people everywhere, North, South, East and West, who are starting similar projects. You are the first and your success will hearten these people (Hareven 1968, 99).

ER knew community development and success required more than just the population; the homesteaders needed resources, education and motivation. Over time, the government funded a community hall, general store, inn, weaving room, tearoom, health center, offices, and factory buildings to give people a place to unify. Sponsored dances, craft sales, farmer markets, clubs, music festivals, athletic teams, and movie screenings brought the community together. For the first

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<sup>2</sup> Tammany Hall was the political machine of the Democratic party, notoriously associated with political corruption for its bribery and bigotry (Encyclopedia Britannica 2017).



times in their lives, families produced enough food and saved the extra. In 1934, homesteaders canned over six thousand gallons of fruit and vegetables (Hoffman 2001, 47). Annabelle Mayor, a homesteader, remarked, “You had the feeling you really did have a chance” (Hoffman 2001, 46). A women’s club named The Eleanor Roosevelt Farm Women’s Association gathered mothers to develop health care programs and prepare school lunches for the children. Solidarity inspired members in the community to take initiative and create a positive environment.

ER frequently visited the community and developed close relationships with the homesteaders. Glenna Williams said, “We went to her for everything. There was so much bureaucracy and Mrs. Roosevelt was a constant; she was our troubleshooter. We all felt we knew her” (Hoffman 2001, 25). Homesteaders warmly recalled ER checking up on their families, agriculture, and attitudes about Arthurdale. ER’s personal devotion to the community showed in her lavish gifts of snowsuits, roller skates, and toys to the children of Arthurdale. Mildred Robey said of ER, “She had a heart of gold. She saw the misery, had a vision and wanted to help her fellow man” (Hoffman 2001, 83). ER became the middle woman for Arthurdale and genuinely strove to improve their conditions, blurring the line between her official responsibilities as First Lady and her personal sense of duty to the homesteaders (Winfield 1990).

Knowing a good education paved the way for success and valuing the discipline of academic work, ER petitioned Bernard Baruch, a wealthy financier, to fund the local school. He donated \$20,000 and she poured her own income from radio and newspaper work into the development of a progressive education system. The government funded the construction of the buildings, but ER and her wealthy supporters privately paid the teachers’ salaries, school materials, and programs. ER hired Elise Ripley Clapp, an educator who lauded hands on activities as the best teaching vessel, to run the school. Clapp viewed this school as the perfect experiment testing “social instrumentality” and education rehabilitation (Haid 1975, 275). Homesteaders disliked diverting from conventional teaching methods (i.e. memorization and testing), but Clapp and ER worked closely to integrate traditional subjects (i.e. math, reading, etc.) with agricultural and construction knowledge. Young students built a miniature reconstruction of Arthurdale, reenacted pioneer history, grew vegetables, and wrote plays (Hoffman 2001). Older students created materials for the community, like looms and handicrafts, and sold them in the cooperative store. The children used their skills to benefit their community. Even parents attended accounting and technical skills workshops in the evenings. ER valued the holistic learning experience and believed the school encouraged community growth (Hoffman 2001). Eventually the school grew to include six buildings, a gymnasium, library, nursery, and a health clinic. Health education programs, dental plans, and baby care classes helped malnourished children and ill families prioritize their wellbeing (Hoffman 2001). Rexford Tugwell, replacement manager of Wilson, considered Arthurdale “90 percent better than any other homestead, due to the school” (Hoffman 2001, 67).

Despite the community bonding ER tried to achieve, some homesteaders lapsed back into their old mindsets of competitiveness and distrust. These families knew poverty their whole lives until moving to Arthurdale and some struggled to adjust to healthy living, agricultural planning, and the federal government’s regulation of Arthurdale. Bureaucratic red tape prevented the homesteaders from leading their community (Haid 1975). Even the purchase of livestock passed through the federal government’s office before approval (Haid 1975). Additionally, limited job offers created tensions for families, as unemployed homesteaders grew jealous of their employed neighbors. Parents worried about the strange education system Clapp designed, as it departed from West Virginia’s primary teaching methods. In 1936, Clapp resigned from Arthurdale and Baruch cut off funding after failing to see significant economic stability in Arthurdale (Hoffman 2001).

ER financially supported the school as it transitioned to the local school board. The First Lady's friends called for her to pull out of the project and stop wasting energy on Arthurdale, but ER desired success and change.

### **Battling Unemployment**

Arthurdale continued to grow, increasing its population to 165 families, and the leaders of the project confronted the problem of unemployment. While the homesteaders earned some income from producing handicrafts goods, they needed more money to pay for their houses and life styles. Subsistence farming provided food resources for individual households, but each homestead family needed approximately \$1,000 for one year for other necessities like clothing, school supplies, and paying off the houses (Haid 1975, 227). The Arthurdale administration proposed a series of Post Office factories in many different subsistence housing programs that would make equipment for the national Post Office Department. Immediately, congressmen angrily protested its establishment. Indiana Representative Louis Ludlow represented the Keyless Lock Company, a major supplier to the Post Office. He feared industrial competition would disadvantage the Keyless Lock Company, justifying that "our army of unemployed will be increased and hundreds who are making good money will be turned out to tramp the streets" (Haid 1975, 122). Other members of Congress rejected the plan because it threatened capitalism. One senator remarked that acceptance of this bill would "destroy the American Republic" (Haid 1975, 125). Supporters of the factory contended that competition arising from the establishment of the factory would be minimal and no different than farming land competition (Haid 1975). In the end, however, the bill lost 271-111.

ER's anxieties mounted as the homesteaders' pleaded that their incomes of \$54 per month failed to support them (Cook 1992). In response, ER and Howe began seeking employment from private businesses, fearful that fighting Congress again for federal support would lead to more backlash. In 1934, General Electric Company accepted their invitation and planned to create a vacuum factory, but not without strict safety valves, like a cancelation clause, that protected their interests if the initiative failed (Haid 1975). In May 1935, the Resettlement Administration absorbed the Subsistence Homestead Division and Rexford Tugwell replaced Wilson as head of the project (Haid 1975). The switch to new leadership left the local Arthurdale administrative board and the federal government confused about who controlled authorization and implantation of programs in Arthurdale. This transition, financial issues, and the legality of the business stalled the completion of the factory for two years. It opened in 1936, and for all the trouble, it only supplied 29 homesteaders with a steady income and failed within one year (Haid 1975). The President of the General Electric Company claimed that the national demand for vacuums had decreased as a result of the Depression (Haid 1975). ER pleaded for FDR to address the issue, emphasizing the families' vital need for the factory to earn money, but the financial and legal tangle prevented her from changing the situation.

ER pursued every avenue of industry to find solutions to the unemployment crisis but met many dead ends. Oftentimes failing businesses sought to capitalize on Arthurdale's vulnerability and reliance on federal support. They investigated over 50 factories ranging from bomb to shoe manufactures, but the lack of federal funds, the failing economy, and the small size of the community posed a major obstacle (Hoffman 2001). Arthurdale's rural isolation failed to create a supportive environment for industries. Homesteaders supported themselves with outside jobs, cooperative projects, and the few federally funded jobs available (Hoffman 2001).

In the late 1930s, ER turned to FDR again, knowing that the booming war industry may pull Arthurdale out of its slump. In 1940, a walkie-talkie factory owned by Silman Manufacturing Company employed one tenth of the homesteaders, paying over \$50,000 in wages in the first five months (Hoffman 2001, 79). The Hoover Aircraft Corporation followed lead in 1943 and contracted at Arthurdale, manufacturing planes for soldier training. Both factories doubled in size during their time at Arthurdale and employed less than half of the homesteaders until the end of the war. Despite the government's initial goal to decentralize industry, industrial work ended up providing employment for a large portion of the community (Haid 1975).

### **The Liquidation of Arthurdale**

By 1938, the population of Arthurdale had expanded to 1,000 people and the last phases of construction and development neared completion. At this time, party seats shifted in Congress, becoming more conservative, and the popularity of the subsistence housing programs plummeted. Tugwell declared the projects "financially unsuccessful" (The New York Times 1936, 11). Scholars estimate Arthurdale's construction and development cost close to \$3 million, a small percent of the \$25 million authorized for over 60 subsistence housing communities constructed around the nation (Haid 1975). The conservative critics denounced Arthurdale as a Communist tactic, arguing that Arthurdale and similar programs were "destroying private ownership of property" (Haid 1975, 309). The onset of World War II shifted priorities and Congress began to focus its attention on funding the war effort. Ultimately, the loss of financial expenses, the unpopularity of Arthurdale, the 1935 change in administrative leadership, World War II, and the lack of economic success pressured Congress and the federal government to liquidate the community, selling the houses to the homesteaders and the properties to industry companies and universities (Haid 1975; Hoffman 2001). Hasty planning, strong federal control on regulations, poor delegation of responsibility, and unclear authority contributed to Arthurdale's economic failure.

After the government liquidation, Arthurdale became a regular neighborhood and the University of West Virginia and private companies bought the community buildings and land for their own use. The children were transferred to new schools and community unity faded (Hoffman 2001). Most community members bought their homes and found new work or continued work for the war industry. The improved economic situation, fueled by WWII, allowed for families to become independent (Haid 1975). In 1984 at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the community created the Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. to celebrate the legacy and tradition of the original Arthurdale homestead (Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. 2017). Today one may tour the New Deal Homestead Museum, Craft Shop and Co-Op Store, rent the Historical Center Hall and attend the New Deal Festival (Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. 2017). Mary Lou Beltz, an original homesteader, says, "to me it was just home. And there are still people out there today who didn't have half what I did" (Moran 2014, 1). The descendants of Arthurdale's homesteaders still actively participate in the community and tell their stories to the nation during festivals and via their website.

### **Epilogue**

Throughout her lifetime, ER returned to Arthurdale for visits and attended many high school graduations (Cook 1992). Of Arthurdale's impact she wrote, "I have always felt that many human beings who might have cost us thousands of dollars in tuberculosis sanitariums, insane asylums and jails were restored to usefulness and given confidence in themselves" (Roosevelt 1961, 180). ER chose to view the project as a success and a teaching opportunity rather than a

financial blunder. She emphasized the humanitarian significance of the project, dignifying the community members in their time of poverty and crisis. After ER's work with Arthurdale, she continued her advocacy of human rights, particularly for American workers, youth, and African Americans. Through her "advisory" role at Arthurdale, ER rewrote the standards for First Ladies' activism and public life. Subsequent First Ladies followed ER's precedent, writing for newspapers, aligning themselves with societal issues, and independently asserting their opinions. ER broke the stereotype of passive, dependent First Lady and female leader

ER's involvement in the Arthurdale project triggered First Ladies to develop their own service platforms and associate themselves with federal projects. For example, Jacqueline Kennedy supported the American Cancer Society, Lady Bird Johnson petitioned for environmental programs, and Michelle Obama established healthy living projects (Watson 2001). Next to ER, Hillary Clinton became one of the most active First Ladies, politically involving herself in health care, women's issues, and foreign policy (Watson 2001). Laura Bush spoke about Muslim women during the Iraq conflict and internationally spotlighted the position of First Lady. Recently, current First Lady, Melania Trump, instituted the *Be Best* campaign to promote "positive social, emotional, and physical habits" (The White House 2018). As the "ideal American woman," First Ladies walk a fine line between controversy and praise. ER's role in Arthurdale demonstrates how First Ladies can involve themselves in their husband's federal projects and develop projects of their own to combat societal issues, despite harsh criticism. ER's dedication to upholding human dignity teaches future women leading change how to persevere and balance their authority. Eleanor Roosevelt's development of the Arthurdale Housing Project questions the extent of First Ladies' influence and responsibility in federal matters, and the extent of power female leaders possess in male dominated spaces.

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