

Eleanor's Little Village

Arthurdale, West Virginia

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President Franklin Roosevelt delivered his only high school commencement speech at the village. Eleanor Roosevelt, First Lady, visited the same village so frequently that she knew many of the residents by name and regularly attended community events. The same settlement became newsworthy in national publications during the 1930s, as it generated heated political debates and commentaries. And it was the same district that annually attracted so many visitors that residents felt they were intended for public display and amusement. Among the visitors were famous “captains of industry” and wealthy financiers. The prominent settlement, once subject to national praise and scorn, has slipped into obscurity despite its storied past.

What is the village? **Arthurdale!** The location is only 45 minutes from Oakland, Maryland, and 90 minutes from Cumberland. Despite its fall from national prominence, Arthurdale’s story is a fascinating combination of politics, government planning, and utopian ideals.

Arthurdale’s genesis occurred during the depths of the Great Depression when layoffs in the coal industry created extreme poverty throughout Appalachia. Scott’s Run, Osage, Jere and other mining communities near Morgantown, West Virginia, were particularly hard hit because of mine closures and cut backs that forced many families to endure wretched living conditions. In 1933, Lorena Hickok, a former news reporter, friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, and recently hired federal investigator, was dispatched to check on public assistance programs. What Hickok observed was disturbing — hungry children sleeping on piles of bug-infested rags and houses dilapidated so that snow blew through the walls. Hickok sent an urgent plea for help to Eleanor Roosevelt.

The First Lady arrived in the Scott’s Run area soon after and was equally appalled at the living conditions. She noticed children eating fat and other food scraps that may have



been better suited to animals. Similar conditions existed in other communities along the Appalachian Mountain range. Something had to be done!

The Roosevelt administration responded to the national economic crisis by creating a variety of government programs that it hoped would turn around the economy; maintaining the status quo seemed unacceptable and even dangerous. Unemployed workers were becoming increasingly restless in the coal fields and industrial centers. Many Americans, including the President and First Lady, feared unrest could spread and destabilize the government. One only had to consider the dictatorships in Italy, Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union to see the results of severe economic and political dislocations.



President Franklin Roosevelt ready to deliver the 1938 Arthurdale High School commencement speech. First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt is seated on the right.



Top: The Arthurdale Association Cooperative General Store.

Above: Between 1933 and 1937, three different types of houses were built in Arthurdale. Fifty Hodgson Houses were built in 1933-1934, seventy-five Wagner Houses in 1935, and forty Stone Houses in 1936-37.

Right: Built in 1935, E15 was originally owned by the Heinz family. The house was purchased by Arthurdale Heritage, Inc., in 1998 and has been restored and furnished to replicate the homestead in 1935.



Privately run charities had been involved in relief efforts, particularly the American Friends Service Committee (a Quaker group), but the needs were so great many believed the federal government should become more directly involved. President Roosevelt's back-to-work programs were intended to give Americans a "New Deal" and restore confidence in the government and economy.

The government's response to the Scott's Run area was unofficially headed by Eleanor Roosevelt who had a long history of charity work, but officially fell under provisions of the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Department of the Interior. The area became the first of 99 homestead communities established across the country. The homesteads involved more than their share of government planning and controversy, though never a major part of the New Deal.

The plan called for some families of the Scott's Run area to be resettled on two to four acre homesteads in Arthurdale, a site in Preston County, West Virginia, and about 14 miles from Morgantown. A tract of land for the settlement was purchased from Richard Arthur at a cost of \$35,000.

Strongly influenced by the "Back-to-the-Land" movement that gained steam in the 1930s, the proposals were vaguely defined, poorly planned, and involved not only the resettlement of "stranded" rural communities but also the resettling of urban residents to a country setting where they could "smell the soil" and "till with joy." All resettled residents would ideally benefit from small scale industry wages that would supplement subsistence farming activities,



thereby creating a local economy that would be resistant to the booms and busts of free markets.

The “Back-to-the-Land” movement drew support from some members of FDR’s “Brain Trust,” academic advisors with utopian and socialistic ideals. Arthurdale was the first to experience the efforts of well-intentioned government planners who never turned a spade of soil in their lives.

Becoming an Arthurdale resident required the completion of written applications, personal interviews, and other screening processes. Ultimately, six hundred applications were received for the 165 homesteads. An all-white group was chosen despite the fact that the Scott’s Run population had long been multicultural. African Americans and foreign-born citizens were specifically forbidden, contrary to Eleanor Roosevelt’s admonition to choose a diverse populace.

Color photos: Arthurdale home, built in 1935, now owned by Arthurdale Heritage, Inc., has been restored and furnished to replicate the homestead in 1935.

Inset: Archival photo of Arthurdale homestead children in their living room.

Homesteaders were provided with a variety of work requirements and opportunities. Wages were set at three dollars per hour for a 48 hour work week, and included efforts to clear the land and excavate foundations for their new homes. When completed the village offered new houses (including electricity, indoor plumbing, and refrigerators), plots of land for farming, small barns, a post office, barber shop, and an educational system. A variety of clubs also offered opportunities for recreational, social, gardening, and educational events. Cooperatives included a general store, farms, a gasoline service station, weaving room, furniture factory, dairy, and poultry operations.

A unique progressive educational system established with direct financial assistance from Eleanor Roosevelt, grouped students by interests and avoided grade levels. Students' assignments featured interdisciplinary hands-on activities that included surveying a small plot of land, building model houses, visiting cooperatives, and other "learning by doing" lessons created under direction of renowned educator Elsie Clapp. The blending of disciplines and cooperative learning aspects of the school captures some characteristics of the current Common Core initiative.

Certain services proved to be decades ahead of their time, specifically the health care clinic and school nursery. Arthurdale quickly became the model homestead village and drew widespread publicity.

In return for resettlement and housing, residents followed a myriad of federal guidelines and paid modest rent, causing critics to label them "colonists." When sold off during WWII, rent was credited as down payment.

How did the planned community fare?

While everyone expected snags with such an ambitious project, an abundance of mistakes quickly surfaced.

The foundations prepared by homesteaders did not match the dimensions of their houses. New York architects were subsequently hired to reconfigure the tiny cottages which caused a slapstick comedy routine of multiple disassembly and re-assemblies, including transferring plumbing from one side of the house to the other and moving entire structures to match up with some chimneys that were curiously placed apart from the structures. Furthermore, the new houses, more properly

called pre-fabricated cottages, were originally intended for Florida and proved to be unsuitable in Preston County; virtually all of them had leaky roofs and insufficient insulation. A second and third series of houses were later ordered that eliminated many of the deficiencies found in the cottages.

The chaos was a result of poor planning and execution. One bureaucrat was responsible for the foundations, while Louis Howe, chief advisor to President Roosevelt, and a project manager secured a deal on houses from a New England company. The two departments obviously failed to communicate. In the midst of the plan was Eleanor



Top: Hand-on activities by school children create "learning by doing" lessons.

Right: Eleanor Roosevelt with a group of Arthurdale graduates.



Roosevelt who sought to cut bureaucratic red tape by exercising her influence with Louis Howe and the President. It was a classic government “boondoggle” that would have been unlikely to occur under the direction of a private developer. Housing costs increased from an expected \$2,000 to more than \$6,000 per unit.

The cooperatives also failed and went out of business because of poor planning and execution. One critic succinctly noted the furniture makers operated as if Adam Smith’s summary on the division of labor did not exist. Each chair, while a quality product, was completed entirely by one individual — a slow process that raised the costs and made it unaffordable to consumers. Importantly, homesteaders were initially prohibited from selling surplus food or products (beyond what was necessary for families), thereby reducing incentives to work.

The small businesses that were intended to supplement the homesteader’s agricultural activities never panned out. Eleanor Roosevelt and Louis Howe used their influence to bring a vacuum cleaner company, box factory, shirt manufacturer, radio cabinet maker, and eventually a World War II enterprise to Arthurdale, but all came and went in quick succession. Arthurdale’s location was distant to major markets.

The failure of small businesses highlighted the need for income wages, even in the agricultural community. Just because residents were perceived to be living off the land they were not excused from needing cash to meet expenses.

The unique educational system ended after Elsie Clapp departed in 1936. Many of the Homesteaders became wary of the vaguely defined curriculum and lack of accountability. The state of West Virginia must also have been wary because it did not certify the program created by Clapp and colleagues. Arthurdale’s school ceased to be independent and was incorporated into the Preston County, WV, public school system.

The homesteaders were subjected to an onslaught of visitors — busloads of them. Curious onlookers peeked in windows, walked uninvited into houses, and gawked at the villagers as if they were museum pieces. In an interesting turn of events, the homesteaders conspired against reporters by fabricating

Top photo: Eleanor Roosevelt giving an Arthurdale tour seeking help from wealthy financiers.

Some of the small businesses at Arthurdale intended to supplement the homesteaders were weaving, furniture making, and a vacuum cleaner company. Ultimately, they failed because of poor planning and execution.

stories for the gullible “city slickers.” One involved indoor toilet facilities. Homesteaders informed the reporters that one coal miner was pleased to find an indoor spring in his new Arthurdale house but became aggravated when the lid kept hitting him in the head.

Not all visitors were curiosity seekers. Mrs. Roosevelt invited some of America’s wealthiest financiers to Scott’s Run and Arthurdale, including Henry Morgenthau and Bernard Baruch. After the tours, the First Lady would politely ask the wealthy guests if they would like to help. The most famous visitor of all, Franklin Roosevelt, delivered the Arthurdale High School commencement address in 1938. Eleanor routinely delivered the addresses for nearly a decade.

Critics of President Roosevelt’s New Deal had a field day with Arthurdale, as its failures played out in the



Below: Arthurdale Visitor Center and The Forge.

Right: The Forge was originally operated by the Mountaineer Craftsmen’s Cooperative Association. Items of pewter, copper, brass, and hand-wrought iron were crafted here for use in Arthurdale or for public sale. Pewter items, a specialty, were marketed nationwide.



press as prime examples of government waste. New Dealers excelled at spending other people’s money!

Upon further reflection, does the Arthurdale social experiment qualify as a failure? From a financial standpoint it would be difficult to argue otherwise. The government quietly got out of the resettlement business and in 1947 sold the property, at a considerable loss, to private owners, many of whom were original homesteaders.

Eleanor Roosevelt felt the wrath of Arthurdale critics but steadfastly defended the humanitarian aspects of the program to the end. There was no escaping the First Lady’s association with Arthurdale because it became widely known as “Eleanor’s Little Village.” Mrs. Roosevelt cultivated friendships and extended special courtesies to homesteaders, including White House social invitations where they were the featured guests, a remarkable turn of events for Scott’s Run residents who previously lived in a self-described Hell. Furthermore, she spent most of her personal income on the town. It is evident the First Lady did not measure success in amounts of money spent but rather in the healthy, educated, well housed families that she came to know over a decade in time. Children that would have otherwise been malnourished grew to be healthy and successful adults. Mrs. Roosevelt understood that not meeting critical needs at an early age may have long term consequences that far exceed dealing with issues at their points of origin.

Jeanne Goodman, Director of the Arthurdale Heritage Association, notes that the overwhelming majority of Arthurdale residents that she has communicated with over the years have positive comments about their formative years. And as one Scott’s Run resident related to Eleanor Roosevelt, “Imagine waking up in Hell one morning, but going to sleep in Heaven at the end of the day.”

Although the Arthurdale social experiment officially ended in 1947, it is likely to generate discussions well into the future. The role of government in providing direct relief to individuals, assistance to communities, and

incentives for business is an ongoing discussion. The Arthurdale experiment offers valuable lessons for those willing to study the recent past.

While the controversy over Arthurdale has largely been forgotten, its memory has been well preserved by a group of civic minded residents who formed the Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. Members are dedicated to preserving the historic community and it has received a National Historical District title. Houses are private residences but visitors are welcome to visit the New Deal Homestead Museum, Craft Shop, and associated buildings where tours may be arranged. There is a fee for the museum. Special events are planned throughout the year.

This year’s New Deal Festival in Arthurdale, WV, will be held on July 9, 2016. See www.arthurdaleheritage.org and www.newdealfestival.org for more information.

Footnote: Eleanor Roosevelt frequently rode the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad passenger train from Washington to Oakland, Maryland, in route to Arthurdale. Bob Boal, President of the Garrett County Historical Society, reports that Mrs. Roosevelt maintained a friendly relationship with Oakland residents and actively engaged in conversations during layovers at the train station.

*The author acknowledges the following individuals for their contributions to the article. Jeanne Goodman, Director of Arthurdale Heritage, Inc., Vanessa Mulé, AmeriCorps Volunteer, C. J. Maloney, **Back to the Land: Arthurdale, FDR’s New Deal, and the Costs of Economic Planning** and Amanda Griffith Penix, Arthurdale.*



Political buttons courtesy Albert Feldstein.

