



Courage to Love

Gender and Sexuality in the Life of Eleanor Roosevelt



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Historic Resource Study
Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site
Hyde Park, New York

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Presented to Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site

Interior Region 1, North Atlantic-Appalachia

Prepared under task agreement P18AC00809 between

The Organization of American Historians and the National Park Service

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Cover Image:

Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt entertain friends at Val-Kill, circa 1926; Nancy Cook is in the center, seated. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 83227185.

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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List of Abbreviations

AP	Associated Press
DNC	Democratic National Committee
ELRO	Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site
ER	Eleanor Roosevelt
FDR	Franklin Delano Roosevelt
FERA	Federal Emergency Relief Administration
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NPS	National Park Service
NYA	National Youth Association
OAH	Organization of American Historians
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
WPA	Works Progress Administration
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League

Introduction

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was born October 11, 1884, to Anna Hall Roosevelt and Elliott Roosevelt, the scion of two long-standing and wealthy New York families. However, this child, who was called Eleanor and retained the Roosevelt name throughout her life by virtue of marrying a distant cousin with the same last name, would go on to live a life vastly unlike the society maven her lineage suggested she would become.¹

Orphaned by age 10, Eleanor Roosevelt (ER) was primarily raised by her maternal grandmother, Mary Livingston Ludlow Hall, in the Hudson River Valley, though her extended family on her father's side (including her father's brother, Theodore Roosevelt) were also involved in her childhood. Educated at a girls' boarding school in England, she married her fifth cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in 1905, at age 20, and for the next 10 years led a fairly predictable life for the wife of a wealthy and ambitious man. She bore six children, one of whom died in infancy. The other five—Anna, James, Elliott, Franklin Jr., and John—were raised by a combination of their parents, servants, and FDR's mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, with whom the family lived.

FDR won election to the New York State Senate in 1910, and ER dutifully filled the role of political wife, first in Albany then, beginning in 1913, in Washington, DC, where FDR served as Assistant Secretary of the US Navy. During World War I, ER threw herself into the war effort, and it was through this work that she began taking on a more independent and public persona.²

A series of personal crises befell the family during the period 1918–21, including ER's discovery of FDR's infidelity and FDR's paralysis as a result of polio.³ By 1922, however, ER was fervently pursuing the interests and activities for which she is remembered. She became involved in various reform efforts as well as Democratic party politics, undergoing a dramatic education in the issues and politics of the day.⁴

In 1924, FDR suggested that ER build a cottage with two of her political friends, Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman, near Fall Kill, a stream where the family liked to picnic. The women agreed, and Val-Kill cottage, as their shared home was called, became a site for ER's personal growth, creativity, political strategizing, and community building. Family and friends regularly gathered there to swim in the pool and picnic by the stream. From 1926 to 1936, ER, Cook, and Dickerman oversaw Val-Kill Industries there, a

¹ For more on ER's family background, see Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 21–55.

² Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 187–236.

³ David Michaelis, *Eleanor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 163–214.

⁴ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 289–337.

company dedicated to producing arts and crafts furnishings and keeping young people close to their family farms. In 1937, ER moved into her own cottage on the site of the former Val-Kill factory, and after the death of her husband in 1945, she made Val-Kill her primary residence. From its inception, Val-Kill played an important role in the Roosevelts' lives and was a backdrop for all they accomplished.

FDR became governor of New York in 1928 and president of the United States in 1932. Once in the White House, ER transformed the role of first lady, a position she held from 1933 until FDR's death in 1945, making her the longest-serving first lady in US history. She was a staunch advocate for those in need and worked behind the scenes to ensure women's access to important roles in government and politics.⁵

After FDR's death, ER developed a distinct and formidable public persona, serving as an important bridge between the political coalition of the New Deal and the liberal resurgence of the 1960s, ushered in by the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960. She was part of the first US delegation to the United Nations and was a primary author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁶ And throughout all this, she continued her work on behalf of those in need, advocating for aid to World War II refugees and lending vocal support to the African American civil rights movement. At the time of her death in 1962, she was one of the most well-known women in the world and had left a legacy of reform and progressivism that remains evident in US policy a hundred years after her work began in earnest.

⁵ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

⁶ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001).



Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt at Hyde Park, 1906. Eleanor holds Franklin's glass, and he holds her knitting. Such gender-role-reversal photographs were a trend among couples in the early twentieth century. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 48224140.

Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, located in Hyde Park, New York, was established in 1977 to recognize the life of this remarkable woman and to preserve and interpret her Val-Kill home, which, the site's foundation document states, was central to her emergence as a "champion of democracy."⁷ The park's original historic resource study was completed in 1980 by Louis Torres, a National Park Service employee.⁸ While that document provided a wealth of information about Roosevelt and her home, it is now more than 40 years old. Historical understanding has changed significantly in the intervening decades, particularly with regard to the history of women, gender, and sexuality. In an effort to stay abreast of changing scholarship, staff at the historic site commissioned this updated historic

⁷ US National Park Service, "Park Anniversaries," 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/npscelebrates/park-anniversaries.htm>; "Foundation Document: Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site" (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, September 2017), quotation 5, <http://npshistory.com/publications/foundation-documents/elro-fd-2017.pdf>. A copy of the park's enabling legislation is included as an appendix to the foundation document.

⁸ Louis Torres, *Historic Resource Study: Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site (Val-Kill), Hyde Park, New York* (Denver: Denver Service Center, Mid-Atlantic/North Atlantic Team, Branch of Historic Preservation, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1980), <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS115622>.

resource study, through the Organization of American Historians. This study looks at the life of the former first lady within the context of the changing gender expectations and understandings of sexuality that were in play during her lifetime, 1884–1962.

Existing Scholarship on Eleanor Roosevelt

Eleanor Roosevelt may well be the most documented American woman of all time. She herself was a prolific writer and left an astounding trove of books and articles describing her life and her views of the world.⁹ After her death, historians took up the mantle, most notably Joseph Lash, who knew ER personally and who published multiple volumes on her life.¹⁰ More recently, Blanche Wiesen Cook has written the most extensive biography of ER, published in three volumes between 1993 and 2016.¹¹ As of 2023, these volumes are considered ER's definitive biography, although another well-respected biography—*Eleanor*, by David Michaelis—was released in 2020. Another recent volume, *Eleanor in the Village: Eleanor Roosevelt's Search for Freedom and Identity in New York's Greenwich Village* (2021), by Jan Jarboe Russell, focuses specifically on the ways ER's time in Greenwich Village impacted her beliefs and her sense of self.¹²

Other biographies focus primarily on her most productive years. These include Doris Kearns Goodwin's *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (1994, winner of the 1995 Pulitzer Prize) and Maurine Beasley's *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* (2010).¹³ Beasley is also the lead editor of *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (2001), a useful reference book on ER's life and associates.¹⁴

⁹ She wrote three volumes of memoirs, which are encapsulated in Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014). In addition, a significant amount of her other writing has been digitized by the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project at George Washington University, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu>, and a smaller amount of personal writing has been digitized by the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/digital-collections>.

¹⁰ Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: Leaders of Our Time*, Originally Published 1971 (New York: Smithmark, 1995); Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* (New York: Norton, 1972); Joseph P. Lash and Eleanor Roosevelt, *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982); Joseph P. Lash and Eleanor Roosevelt, *A World of Love: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends, 1943–1962* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984).

¹¹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933–1938* (New York: Viking, 1999); Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Three, 1939–1962* (New York: Viking, 2016).

¹² Michaelis, *Eleanor*; Jan Jarboe Russell, *Eleanor in the Village: Eleanor Roosevelt's Search for Freedom and Identity in New York's Greenwich Village* (New York: Scribner, 2021).

¹³ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*; See also Beasley's earlier book, Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

Allida Black focuses specifically on ER's impact on the Democratic Party in her book *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (1996), and Mary Ann Glendon's book *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (2001) offers an in-depth view of ER's time with the United Nations. More recently, John F. Sears details ER's work with World War II Jewish refugees in *Refuge Must Be Given: Eleanor Roosevelt, the Jewish Plight, and the Founding of Israel* (2021).¹⁵

Another body of work considers ER within the context of some of her most significant relationships. Hazel Rowley offers an in-depth study of ER's marriage in *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage* (2010). Susan Quinn explores her relationship with Lorena Hickok in *Eleanor and Hick: The Love Affair That Shaped a First Lady* (2017), while Michael Golay considers the work the two women accomplished in *America 1933: The Great Depression, Lorena Hickok, Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of the New Deal* (2013). Edna Gurewitsch, wife of David Gurewitsch, documents her husband's intense friendship with ER in her later years in *Kindred Souls: The Friendship of Eleanor Roosevelt and David Gurewitsch* (2002). And Patricia Bell-Scott considers the unlikely friendship between ER and African American civil rights activist and lawyer Pauli Murray with her book *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship* (2016).¹⁶

ER, along with her uncle Theodore Roosevelt and her husband FDR, was the subject of a seven-part Ken Burns documentary in 2014, *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*, and a companion volume by the same name, written by FDR biographer Geoffrey C. Ward, was published that year as well.¹⁷

Finally, readers will find the most detailed discussion of Val-Kill in Louis Torres's 1980 historic resource study, mentioned earlier; Kenneth S. Davis's *Invincible Summer: An Intimate Portrait of the Roosevelts, Based on the Recollections of Marion Dickerman* (1974); and Emily Herring Wilson's *The Three Graces of Val-Kill: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nan Cook in the Place They Made Their Own* (2017).¹⁸

¹⁵ Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Glendon, *A World Made New*; John F. Sears, *Refuge Must Be Given: Eleanor Roosevelt, the Jewish Plight, and the Founding of Israel* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2021).

¹⁶ Hazel Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); Susan Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick: The Love Affair That Shaped a First Lady*, 2017; Michael Golay, *America 1933: The Great Depression, Lorena Hickok, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Shaping of the New Deal* (New York: Free Press, 2013); Edna P. Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls: The Friendship of Eleanor Roosevelt and David Gurewitsch* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002); Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

¹⁷ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* (Alexandria, VA: Distributed by PBS Distribution, 2014); Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

¹⁸ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*; Kenneth S. Davis and Marion Dickerman, *Invincible Summer: An Intimate Portrait of the Roosevelts, Based on the Recollections of Marion Dickerman* (New York: Atheneum, 1974); Emily Herring Wilson, *The Three Graces of Val-Kill: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nancy Cook in the Place They Made Their Own* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

Organization of This Report

In approaching this new historic resource study, I sought to not simply duplicate information contained in these other volumes, but to provide National Park Service staff with a perspective on Eleanor Roosevelt that is not readily available in standard biographies. As a historian of gender and sexuality, I see many historical trends in this area reflected in ER's extraordinary life. I believe a deeper understanding of Eleanor Roosevelt is available by considering her life and work within the larger context of changing understandings of gender and sexuality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, in this report, readers will find ER residing amid a much broader time of change, in which fundamental understandings of women, marriage, and sexual desire changed dramatically.

I approach this task from five separate contexts. Chapter 1, "Changing Gender Expectations and the Rise of the New Woman," focuses on shifting understandings of gender that occurred in the United States between roughly 1870 and 1930. This chapter argues that, although raised in the gender conventions of an earlier era, ER would come to represent a new view of women that emerged at the turn of the 20th century. Chapter 2, "Marriage and Sexuality," considers the relationship of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt within the redefinition of marriage ideals that occurred in the early 20th century. Understanding the ways in which marital conventions changed in the modern era sheds light on this important relationship in ER's life, which changed significantly over the course of her 40-year marriage. This chapter also includes a discussion of the unconventional family of choice that the Roosevelts built around themselves.

Chapter 3, "Eleanor Roosevelt's Female World," considers the female-centered aspects of ER's life and work. I examine ER's key female relationships, as well as the ways these women created a political network to promote the cause of women's advancement. The prevalence of same-sex romantic partnerships within this network—and among ER's close friends—receives particular attention.

Chapter 4, "Eleanor Roosevelt's Public Image," examines the changing ways ER represented herself and her work. I argue that ER nurtured a public persona that relied on traditional ideas about the proper role of women, even as she used that image to further the advancement of women in government and politics. The study concludes with Chapter 5, "The Uses of Val-Kill," which focuses on the Val-Kill property and the multiple ways ER used this site: as a gathering place, as a site of reflection, as a place to experiment and develop her political views, and as an exercise in soft power to reinforce for her visitors her influence over many political issues of her day.

Taken as a whole, I hope this report provides a broader historical context in which to consider the life of an extraordinary woman, one who both reflected the values of her time and helped shaped times that were yet to come.

CHAPTER ONE

Changing Gender Expectations and the Rise of the New Woman

In the late 19th century, a series of societal changes coalesced to significantly alter the roles and expectations of women in the United States. To help explain these dramatic changes, the idea of the “New Woman” emerged in the 1890s. In the words of historian Ellen Dubois, “These ‘New Women’ no longer thought of themselves primarily in domestic terms, but were educated, independent minded, and career oriented. They were proudly athletic, playing tennis, riding bicycles, and dressing in simpler, less confining clothes.”¹

The product of an era of extreme change, the New Woman fully expected to play a substantial role in society, far beyond the traditional role of wife and mother. She came of age amid rapid urbanization, a growing movement toward progressive reform, increased access to higher education, and expanding employment opportunities for women. And she was eager to help shape the future that would arise from so much change. Literary scholar Martha Patterson has described her as “a liminal figure between the Victorian woman and the flapper.”²

Born primarily in the 1870s and 1880s, the New Women came of age alongside Eleanor Roosevelt, and they represent all the societal changes taking place during ER’s formative years. Beginning in the 1920s, many of these New Women (now approaching middle age) would become ER’s friends and mentors. Nancy Cook, Molly Dewson, Marion Dickerman, Esther Lape, Frances Perkins, and Elizabeth Read all fit neatly into the dominant view of the New Woman, whose middle-class upbringing and European ancestry were assumed without much comment. Lorena Hickok and Rose Schneiderman represent a working-class version of the same stereotype, while Mary McLeod Bethune possesses characteristics of the African American incarnation.

Yet, unlike many of her contemporaries, ER grew up largely insulated from the changes rocking much of the country at the turn of the 20th century. Her family was part of the wealthy elite, and this segment of society was most likely to conform to an older, and

¹ Ellen Carol DuBois, *Suffrage: Women’s Long Battle for the Vote* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 134.

² Martha H. Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 27.

increasingly outdated, gender system known to historians as the Cult of True Womanhood. As such, in her youth ER did not fit the image of the New Woman, nor did her friends Isabella Greenway and Caroline O'Day, who had similar upper-class backgrounds.

This chapter examines changing gender systems, in order to provide a gender history perspective on the striking transformation of Eleanor Roosevelt over the course of her lifetime. I argue that ER's evolution from timid bride to political powerbroker in many ways represents, albeit in extreme form, the change in gender ideologies that took place in the United States during her lifetime. This chapter first discusses the older gender model of the Cult of True Womanhood, which provided ER's early frame of reference. It then examines the broad cultural shifts that gave rise to the rejection of that older model in favor of the ideal of the New Woman. These shifts included rapid urbanization, the Progressive Era reform movement, increased access to higher education, the rise of the social sciences, and expanding employment opportunities for women.

Before beginning this discussion, however, a note of clarification is in order. The phrase "New Woman" originated in print in 1894 and was quickly adopted by the US press to explain the distinctive characteristics of the young women of that era. In her own time, the New Woman was a controversial figure—celebrated by some, derided by others—and served as one of the flashpoints in the struggle of the native-born white middle class to make sense of their increasingly multicultural and urbanized country. However, historians now employ the term more loosely. In historical scholarship, the term "New Woman" is sometimes used to describe multiple consecutive generations of women who came of age beginning in the 1870s (thus incorporating the first generation of women who worked in settlement houses) and continuing through the 1920s (thus incorporating the first generation of women who came of age after women's suffrage). Contemporary historians are correct that gender roles took on a "modern temper" across this broader time period, and this chapter discusses changes that also took place over this larger time span. However, those changes had the most profound impact on women born in the 1870s and 1880s, and they are the primary focus of this discussion.³

³ Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 2; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1985), 245–96; Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

An Older Model: The 19th-Century Cult of True Womanhood

For most of the 19th century, the dominant US gender system, sometimes now called “separate spheres,” emphasized the differences between men and women. According to this ideology, men were better equipped for the world of politics, business, and debate, and thus belonged to the “public sphere.” In contrast, women were better equipped for the world of home, childrearing, and moral reflection, and thus belonged to the “private sphere.” Men and women were characterized as having vastly different temperaments, and each spent a significant portion of every day in same-sex environments. The opposite sex was presented as a mysterious puzzle, and this lent itself to the romanticism of the mid-19th century. The various components of this ideology contributed to the growth of separate male and female cultures in the United States.⁴

Success within the domestic sphere assigned to women required certain personal attributes, and those traits coalesced to form an ideal often referred to by historians as the “Cult of True Womanhood.” Under this model, women were expected to be docile and timid, deferring to men in most matters. Virtue was critical to this construction of womanhood—women were expected both to have a heightened sense of Christian morality *and* to be the arbiters of male sexual desire. They were seen as lacking in sexual desire themselves, motivated instead by romantic love and the maternal instinct to engage in procreative sex. We see in this the origins of a “double standard,” by which women were held to different sexual standards than men.⁵

Twentieth-century historians had no sooner articulated the contours of this historical gender ideology than they began finding flaws with it. The premises on which the ideology of separate spheres was based—men as wage earners and women remaining cloistered in domestic space—ignored the reality of a significant number of women in the 19th-century United States. Most glaring, the system of slavery made a mockery of this ideal for African American women who were enslaved, and even free African Americans faced so many challenges to their livelihood that very few could afford the leisure of such starkly differentiated gender roles. Similarly, the idea of men in public and women in

⁴ Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 40–42; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1–29; Marla R. Miller, *Entangled Lives: Labor, Livelihood, and Landscapes of Change in Rural Massachusetts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 193–221.

⁵ Mary Kelley, “Beyond the Boundaries,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 21, no. 1 (2001): 73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3125096>; Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920,” *American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 620–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1856119>; John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 69–72.

private was intricately tied to the industrial revolution and the rise of wage labor. These economic developments moved “men’s work” outside of the family home, but rural households held on longer to an older agrarian model where both men and women labored within the household for their subsistence. And throughout the 19th century (we could arguably say well into the 20th century), poor families in both urban and rural areas were likely to employ a combination of wage-earning and subsistence (satisfying their needs through other means, such as growing their own food, bartering with neighbors, pooling resources), and this effort required the labor of both men and women. In fact, young women and girls were among the *most* likely to be wage earners in poor families, because of the ease with which they could find low-paying, low-skill factory jobs.⁶

Even among the middle and upper classes, who had the resources available to achieve the ideal of separate spheres, the divisions were not absolute. As historian Mary Ryan, among others, have shown, even these women actively engaged with public life through their work in churches and synagogues, charity organizations, and political activism (most visibly, the abolition and temperance movements).⁷ Thus separate spheres and the Cult of True Womanhood are best understood as cultural ideals, rather than reality. The values embedded in these cultural constructions provided a set of standards by which women were judged; they shaped the boundaries of “acceptable” behavior for women of a certain class and ethnicity and, in turn, delineated all the ways women of other classes and ethnicities were supposedly inferior to women who could meet this ideal.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s family was among the minority of the population who *did* have the resources to make the Cult of True Womanhood ideal a reality. And as a counterpart to the possibility of maintaining separate spheres, this sliver of society was also largely isolated from the changes that were precipitating the new gender model.⁸ Whereas moderately privileged women were embracing the chance to attend college, earn their own wages, and address the problems of society through professional work, the wealthy

⁶ Mary P. Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women and Men through American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 61–64; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Kimberley A. Reilly, “Sex without Spheres: Labor, Marriage, and Citizenship in the Era of the New Woman” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008); Susan Ware, *American Women’s History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 44–49.

⁷ Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Baker, “The Domestication of Politics”; Linda K. Kerber et al., “Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1989): 565–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1922356>.

⁸ Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 3–6.

elite were far slower to embrace higher education for women; they did not need to work for a living; and they existed in a rarefied world where they were largely insulated from the issues of poverty and vice.



Portrait of Anna Hall Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt's mother.
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, ELRO 1652.

Eleanor Roosevelt and the Cult of True Womanhood

Because of the class she was born into and the specific circumstances of her upbringing, Eleanor Roosevelt was primarily raised within this older ideal of womanhood—even though a new gender ideal was beginning to challenge this older model by 1884, the year of her birth. ER's mother, Anna Ludlow Hall Roosevelt was a legendary beauty within New York society, and embodied the 19th-century ideal of womanhood. She was “fair, frail, and fragile,” in the words of one society page column “and therefore a good illustration of beauty in American women.”⁹ A later journalist (and Roosevelt cousin), James Alsop shared

⁹ Quoted in Jan Jarboe Russell, *Eleanor in the Village: Eleanor Roosevelt's Search for Freedom and Identity in New York's Greenwich Village* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 11.

that Theodore Roosevelt was of the opinion that his sister-in-law was “a rigidly conventional woman.”¹⁰ However, ER’s childhood failed to meet the romantic ideals of 19th-century family life. Her father, Elliott Roosevelt, was deeply unstable; in the early years of Eleanor’s childhood, he became addicted to morphine and laudanum, as well as reaching a more advanced stage of alcoholism.¹¹ As a result, Anna and Elliott had a turbulent marriage that may have contributed to Anna’s untimely death at age 29.¹²

In late December 1892, shortly after ER turned eight years old, her mother died of diphtheria; five months later ER’s younger brother Elliott, just four years old, also died of illness.¹³ After Anna’s death, Eleanor and her youngest brother Hall were sent to live with their maternal grandmother, Mary Livingston Ludlow Hall, while their father sought to regain his health and sobriety. He ultimately lost this battle, dying in the midst of delirium tremors in 1894.¹⁴

An orphan at age 10, ER (and brother Hall) continued to live with their maternal grandmother in the Hudson River Valley. Mary Hall was born in 1843, of a generation and class that was firmly entrenched in the Cult of True Womanhood. Like her daughter, she had conservative views and was quite pious, and raised ER in a traditional manner, emphasizing decorum and conventional thinking. At least once, she told the young Eleanor, “You are a girl and you have to be more sensible and thoughtful than your brother.” However, according to ER biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook, ER rarely criticized the way she was raised. In fact, Cook argues that Mary Hall’s strict supervision, coupled with the affection of Anna’s sisters (ER’s aunts, who also lived in Mary Hall’s household), provided ER with the stability and warmth her earlier childhood had lacked.¹⁵

Overall, ER’s upbringing was a conservative one in which she learned to adhere to the traditional gender roles of the 19th-century upper class. However, for a few years of her adolescence, she caught a glimpse of a different approach to being a woman. This alternative came in the form of Marie Souvestre, headmistress at Allenswood School where ER completed her formal education. In contrast to ER’s grandmother (and, later, her mother-in-law Sara Delano Roosevelt), Souvestre did not conform to this older gender model, although she was born in 1830.

¹⁰ Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 17.

¹¹ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 33–35.

¹² For more detail, see Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 38–55.

¹³ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 446; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 84.

¹⁴ David Michaelis, *Eleanor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 31–35.

¹⁵ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 92–96; Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 37–38, 44, quotation 44.

Souvestre never married and seems to have identified romantically with other women. She was educated (a characteristic not particularly prized within the Cult of True Womanhood) and European, thus escaping the particularly American elements of this gender system. She also was far more politically and socially progressive than either Mary Hall or Sara Roosevelt. As such, Souvestre may have served as an antidote to some of the more traditional gender indoctrination ER received. However, Souvestre did run a school for girls of the upper class. Instructing her pupils in “refinement”—with all its traditional gender and class connotations—was part of her duties.¹⁶

It was through Souvestre and her curriculum at Allenswood that ER began to develop the social conscience that would later be her hallmark. Upon returning to the United States after school, ER volunteered at the College Settlement House, teaching calisthenics and dancing. This work is an early example of ER’s efforts to contribute to the betterment of society; it also introduced her directly to the problems of the urban poor.¹⁷ Reflecting on the experience in 1960, ER declared, “it taught me an understanding of a side of life that might have remained to me a closed book if I had not come in close contact with settlement work.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, despite occasional attempts to engage with larger problems of the era, ER’s life until middle age primarily reflects her efforts to live up to the Cult of True Womanhood ideal. She left Allenswood and returned to the United States at the age of eighteen in order to come out into society, a custom her grandmother insisted Eleanor adhere to.¹⁹ She soon began a courtship with her fifth cousin Franklin and married him in March 1905. Franklin was extremely close to his mother and being a dutiful wife meant also embracing her new mother-in-law, Sara Delano Roosevelt. Sara had been born to a wealthy family in 1854 and so was herself raised within traditional 19th-century gender roles. She had also married James Roosevelt (FDR’s father), a man who was 26 years her senior, further ensuring that she would adhere to an older gender model.²⁰

Sara served as a mother figure to Eleanor, and the younger woman put a great deal of effort into living up to her mother-in-law’s expectations. In ER’s own words, “I still lived under the compulsion of my early training; duty was perhaps the motivating force of my life, often excluding what might have been joy or pleasure.”²¹ She was timid and

¹⁶ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 488–90; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 102–24.

¹⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 135–36.

¹⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, March 23, 1960,” *United Feature Syndicate*, March 23, 1960, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

¹⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 125–32.

²⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 162–86.

²¹ Eleanor Roosevelt, “This Is My Story,” *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 66.

accommodating, deferring to her mother-in-law on nearly every matter. She did not attend her cousin Alice Roosevelt's wedding at the White House, for instance, because, at six months pregnant, it might be considered unseemly for ER to appear in public. She did not protest when her mother-in-law purchased adjoining townhouses (connected internally) for herself and FDR's family. And she mimicked Sara's views about the proper activities for a society wife to engage in.²²



Sara Delano Roosevelt, ER's mother-in-law, circa 1925..
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, ELRO 1576.

²² Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 175–86.

In addition, ER supported her husband's interests instead of pursuing her own: "It was a wife's duty to be interested in whatever interested her husband, whether that was politics, books, or a particular dish for dinner."²³ And until World War I, her public activities were largely an extension of her husband's work. However, beginning with the Great War and continuing into the 1920s, she came increasingly into the orbit of female peers who adhered to a different gender model, that of the New Woman.

A New Woman for a New Era

While ER was growing up within her own tragic childhood and absorbing the gender ideals of an older generation, changes were rocking the United States to such a degree that they would fundamentally alter both the contours of daily life *and* the gender expectations of many of the people in ER and FDR's generation.

Precipitating many of these changes, the US Civil War (1861–65) wrought significant economic and social disruption in the United States. The national economy needed to rebuild itself into a system that did not rely on slavery to function, and as part of this effort, the United States began urbanizing and industrializing far more rapidly than it had in the antebellum period. In addition, the ideology of separate spheres, dependent as it was on heterosexual marriage, strained under the reality of so many men killed or disabled in the war.

As the century continued, postbellum economic changes led to a concentration of wealth and increased labor exploitation, and these in turn led to growing urban poverty. In this era, the shape of immigration, ever-present in US history, changed as well. Whereas earlier immigrants had primarily come from northern and western Europe, late-19th-century immigrants came to the eastern United States from eastern and southern Europe and to the western United States from China and Japan. These new Americans tended to have darker complexions and different religions and added new levels of cultural difference within US society. And, finally, the rapid growth of cities brought about by these changing economic and demographic forces strained urban infrastructure, resulting in many city dwellers living without adequate housing, sanitation, food safety, and health care, leading reformers to call for large-scale progressive solutions to address these issues.²⁴

A generation of women born in the 1870s and 1880s, amid this flux, and educated in the colleges and universities newly opened to women, were eager to contribute their energy and skill to these issues. However, as historian Rosalind Rosenberg has stated, "the

²³ "This Is My Story," Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 66.

²⁴ Walter T. K. Nugent, *Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

view of womanhood within which feminism first came of age [in the 1840s and 1850s] could no longer accommodate the aspirations of a new generation of feminists.”²⁵ This was a distinctively new era, and so a new type of woman was required.

The Challenges of Urbanization

Historians of the United States often refer to the period between the 1870s and the start of World War I (1914) as the Gilded Age. The Progressive Era started slightly later, in the 1880s, but generally encompasses the same time period. This is not a coincidence. The extreme wealth referenced when discussing the Gilded Age was, in fact, an extreme *concentration* of wealth. Some people in the US experienced great financial success because others experienced great poverty. Regulation of the economy and labor protections were at this time seen as interference in the natural workings of the capitalist market, and thus there was no check on monopolies and labor exploitation. There was also no federal income tax until 1912, so the redistribution of money from the wealthy to the government (and, through this entity, to the public good) was not what it would be later in the 20th century. The result was crushing poverty for many, and this poverty was most obvious in the nation’s growing cities. A national effort to address both the causes and the effects of poverty soon began, and this effort in support of progressive reform is why the era is also called the Progressive Era.²⁶

In 1850, only 6 US cities had populations larger than 100,000. That number had increased to 38 by 1900, just 50 years later. Americans left rural areas for cities in search of wage labor, the same thing that attracted many of the immigrants that came to the United States in this era. The majority of US inhabitants still lived in rural areas; this would not change until 1920. But, nevertheless, cities were growing at unprecedented rates, and it soon became clear that housing and urban infrastructure were straining under this rapid increase in urban population. Manufacturing jobs were plentiful; in 1870, “factory worker” was the second most common job in the United States, after farmer. However, in this era before labor laws and unions, these jobs were often quite dangerous and did not pay what we would now describe as a “living wage.” Meanwhile, corporate mergers were giving employers ever more control over laborers, who had fewer options to find another

²⁵ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), xiv.

²⁶ Baker, “The Domestication of Politics,” 629; Alexis Gregory, *Families of Fortune: Life in the Gilded Age* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 9–16; Mark W. Summers, *The Gilded Age, or, The Hazard of New Functions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997); McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 3–13.

employer. In the seven years between 1897 and 1904 alone, one-third of all US companies were absorbed by mergers. By 1905, less than 1 percent of manufacturing companies employed over 25 percent of manufacturing laborers.²⁷



Cover of *Harper's Weekly*, "Homes of the Poor," 1883, by T. De Thulstrup.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-75197.

²⁷ Jon C. Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 1; Nugent, *Progressivism*, 8–9; Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 11.

Women's Work of Reform

Extreme poverty was the most obvious issue, but it was exacerbated by a host of complementary issues: labor exploitation, lack of sanitation, epidemics of disease, substandard housing, competing cultural value systems, and the effect of all these issues on children. Caring for the needy had traditionally been part of women's role, an extension of the duties of the home. And so, women's organizations were among the first to respond to the needs of the country's growing population of urban poor.²⁸

The settlement house movement provided one avenue for women to address the problems brought on by poverty. Settlement houses, located in poor neighborhoods, were multifaceted social service organizations providing assistance, instruction, childcare, and recreation for their neighbors. The idea originated in England and was brought to the United States in the 1880s. The first US settlement house, New York City's Neighborhood Guild, began in 1886.²⁹ Hull House, in Chicago, perhaps the nation's most well-known settlement, was founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Following Hull House's example, settlements quickly sprang up throughout the urban United States.³⁰ In the early 1890s, there were six settlement houses in the whole country; by 1900 there were more than 100 and more than 400 by 1910.³¹

In 1889, the same year that Hull House was established, the College Settlement was founded on Rivington Street in New York City, in a neighborhood "more densely populated than any part of London" that accounted for "one-half of all arrests for gambling, and one-tenth of all arrests for crime in New York."³² This was the settlement where ER chose to volunteer after her return from boarding school at age 18. A group of debutantes, including ER's friend Mary Harriman, formed the Junior League for the Promotion of Settlement Movements (later shortened to the Junior League) in 1900, and the group chose the College Settlement as their focus. This effort represents an interesting melding of upper-class women's tradition of philanthropy with the on-the-ground actions of Progressive Era reformers. The Junior League's work with the College Settlement also provided ER with her first exposure to the issues of urban poverty.³³

²⁸ Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Duménil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 415–21.

²⁹ Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City*, 32.

³⁰ Nugent, *Progressivism*, 61–63.

³¹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 100.

³² John Palmer Gavit, *Bibliography of College, Social, and University Settlements*, 3rd ed., rev., Nineteenth Century Collections Online: Women and Transnational Networks (Cambridge, MA: Co-operative Press, 1897), 37–38.

³³ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 134–35; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 469–70.

Settlement houses continued well into the 20th century, as did other voluntary efforts by women. However, by the final decades of the 19th century, the effects of urbanization and poverty were so wide-ranging, and on such a scale, that more than volunteer work was needed. Partly in response to the obvious need and partly in response to the opportunities presented by that need, middle-class women at the turn of the century began leveraging their traditional role as caretakers into paid employment in social work, academia, and government.³⁴ Many women continued to volunteer in reform efforts, such as ER's work in the College Settlement, even while others were beginning to be paid for their labor. Together, in the words of one leading US history textbook, "By the end of the nineteenth century, leisure-class women had almost totally commandeered nongovernmental civic life from men. Thus, another apt label for the post-Reconstruction years is the 'Woman's Era.'"³⁵

However, for women to move beyond volunteer work into paid careers in progressive reform, they needed to have educations on par with men. The expansion of higher education opportunities for women was another important component of the rise of the New Woman at the turn of the 20th century.

Expansion of Educational Opportunities for Women

Prior to the Civil War, very few women had access to college. Young women with the financial means could further their basic education by attending a female academy, but these institutions were not academically on par with a college education. Many accomplished women in the generation before Eleanor Roosevelt's attended such institutions. To name but a few, Jane Addams (1860–1935), founder of the US settlement house movement; Julia Lathrop (1858–1932), the first woman to head a federal bureau (the Children's Bureau, 1912–22); and Ellen Gates Starr (1859–1940), a cofounder with Addams of Hull House, were all graduates of Rockford Female Seminary in Illinois. ER herself followed this

³⁴ Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Elizabeth N. Agnew, *From Charity to Social Work: Mary E. Richmond and the Creation of an American Profession* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Gary R. Lowe and P. Nelson Reid, eds., *The Professionalization of Poverty: Social Work and the Poor in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999); Penina Migdal Glazer and Miriam Slater, *Unequal Colleagues: The Entrance of Women into the Professions, 1890–1940* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Don S. Kirschner, *The Paradox of Professionalism: Reform and Public Service in Urban America, 1900–1940* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

³⁵ DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 297.

older model by attending Allenswood, a private girls' boarding school in London, to finish her education, rather than attending college. Her experiences there are discussed in Chapter 3, "Eleanor Roosevelt's Female World."³⁶

In the 1870s and 1880s, however, a series of women's schools offering college-level degrees opened, primarily in the East. Smith College, Wellesley College, Radcliffe College, and Bryn Mawr College were all founded between 1872 and 1886. Vassar College, just down the road from Hyde Park in Poughkeepsie, New York, preceded this trend, opening in 1865. In addition, the new public universities opening in midwestern states, such as the University of Wisconsin and the University of Michigan, permitted women to enroll. This was partly because competition from older, more esteemed men's colleges in the East limited the number of male students these public universities were able to attract. African American women with financial resources also gained access to higher education, although most of their opportunities were confined to institutions specifically devoted to African American education, such as Howard University, founded in 1867, and Spelman College (originally Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary), founded in 1881.³⁷

Middle-class women thrilled at the opportunity to further their education. When the University of Chicago opened in 1892, 40 percent of its undergraduate students were women. By 1900, more than 37 percent of all college students in the United States were women; and by 1920, their numbers had risen still further. That year, women comprised almost 48 percent of US college students, and while African American women earned only 2 percent of the college degrees earned by women, this was still higher than the 1.6 percent of male degrees earned by African American men. And a great many of these degree-earning women also desired to put their education to work in the world. Between 1880 and 1900, about 10 percent of American women never married, but about 50 percent of female college graduates remained single in this same period, and presumably these women were instead entering the workforce. The challenges of rapid urbanization called to these women more than the Cult of True Womanhood.³⁸

³⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 13; Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936," 255.

³⁷ Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 13; Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 21–23; Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, 30; Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day: Women Who Invented the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 2010), 23; Ware, *American Women's History*, 67; Rayford Whittingham Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867–1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969); "About Us," Spelman College, 2012, <http://www.spelman.edu/about-us>.

³⁸ Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, 43; Ware, *American Women's History*, 67–69; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 14; Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *To Live More Abundantly: Black Collegiate Women, Howard University, and the Audacity of Dean Lucy Diggs Slowe* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2022), 14.

The Rise of the Social Science Professions

Along with, and possibly related to, the rapid expansion of women in higher education, the late 19th century also gave rise to new forms of knowledge. As cities became larger and more complex; as European American cultural hegemony was threatened by exposure to other cultures and belief systems; and as those same European Americans sought to support their cultural dominance through allegedly “objective” scientific study, new fields of study took shape. These disciplines sought to apply scientific principles to the study of society, in the hopes that doing so would lead to answers to society’s problems. Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, Public Health, and Social Work all became established academic disciplines during this era.³⁹

Some universities even permitted women to pursue graduate degrees in these disciplines, and many women did just that, although this development happened significantly later than the expansion of women’s undergraduate education. Women’s access to graduate programs mostly happened after the turn of the 20th century. The nation’s first school of social work, the New York School of Philanthropy (later the New York School of Social Work), opened in 1898 and began offering full-time courses of study in 1904. Two other programs in social work opened in 1904 as well, in Chicago and Boston. Columbia University and the University of Chicago (which had only recently opened, in 1892) had the largest female enrollments in the social science disciplines and granted the bulk of women’s PhDs after 1900. The University of Chicago counted among its alumni such esteemed social reformers as worker-rights advocate Florence Kelley; Julia Lathrop, director of the US Children’s Bureau (1912–1922); medical doctor and settlement house worker Alice Hamilton; and social scientist Sophonisba Breckinridge. By 1910, 10 percent of all PhD degrees from American universities were earned by women, and this figure had risen to over 15 percent by 1920.⁴⁰

In her study of 28 women who played key roles in the New Deal, historian Susan Ware found that 70 percent had attended college, and of that group, half had gone on to graduate study. Six—Jane Hoey, Lucy Somerville Howorth, Mary LaDame, Frances Perkins, Josephine Roche, and Hilda Worthington—were at the same university, Columbia,

³⁹ Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*; Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Kathleen Waters Sander, *Mary Elizabeth Garrett: Society and Philanthropy in the Gilded Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Crista DeLuzio, *Female Adolescence in American Scientific Thought, 1830–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Psychiatric Persuasion: Knowledge, Gender, and Power in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁴⁰ Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 27; Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, xviii; Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day*, 8; June Sochen, *The New Woman: Feminism in Greenwich Village, 1910–1920* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972), ix.

within the same decade, 1910–20, all studying in social science disciplines. Graduate work at the University of Chicago and the New York School of Social Work were also represented within this group of women.⁴¹

Women seemed disproportionately drawn to these new disciplines. Most likely, this was because at the time, social science was geared toward the betterment of society. As a result, it had many practical applications in addressing the problems of the needy, and this, as discussed previously, meshed somewhat with women's more traditional roles. Indeed, numerous historians have chronicled the ways in which the social sciences created professional employment opportunities out of tasks that women had previously performed, without pay, as part of their feminine role.⁴² A generation later, ER would employ a similar strategy, couching her lobbying and political brokering in the framework of traditional ideas about women. This strategy is explored more fully in Chapter 4.

Expansion of Women in the Workforce

As many previously voluntary elements of reform professionalized—transforming into such careers as social work, child welfare, the settlement movement, and public health—educated women's opportunities for paid work expanded. Nationally, in the early 20th century, women in the workforce held a disproportionately higher number of professional jobs than men, when compared to the workforce in general. And the percentage of employed women working in professional jobs grew from 8.2 percent in 1900 to 14.2 percent in 1930. These were the New Women, who had yearned for more than a traditional domestic role. Many of them were the same women who would later join the Roosevelts' New Deal.⁴³ For instance, Molly Dewson, leader of Democratic Party women in the 1930s, worked as a social worker at the Massachusetts State Industrial School for Girls in the early years of the century and helped draft that state's minimum wage law.⁴⁴ US Secretary of Labor under FDR, Frances Perkins, worked at the New York Consumers' League and then the Committee on Safety of the City of New York, advocating for safer and more humane working conditions for factory workers.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal*, 23.

⁴² Baker, "The Domestication of Politics," 636–37; Daniel J. Walkowitz, "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity: Social Workers in the 1920s," *American Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (October 1990): 1051–75.

⁴³ Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day*, 22; Walkowitz, "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity," 1055; Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal*.

⁴⁴ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 132.

⁴⁵ Charles H. Trout, "Perkins, Frances," in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Not all female professionals were social scientists and social workers, however. They were also teachers, journalists, bureaucrats, and politicians, professions that were well represented in Eleanor Roosevelt's inner circle, by friends such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Nancy Cook, and Marion Dickerman (teachers), and Lorena Hickok and Esther Lape (journalists).



Women leaving work, 1903, by Francis Benjamin Johnston.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-24053.

Likewise, not all women in the workforce were professionals or had a college education. Employment opportunities for women expanded in this era across all skill levels. The Gilded Age explosion of manufacturing jobs opened employment opportunities for working-class women as well as working-class men. Within this class of employment, women were most likely to work in textile manufacturing and piece work, where they performed product assembly out of their homes and were paid by the piece instead of by the hour.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 8; Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day*, 24.

Another economic feature of the period between 1880 and 1920 was the expansion of clerical jobs, which did not require a college degree and were not considered “professional” but paid better than manufacturing or menial labor. In addition to fostering the expansion of factory jobs, the huge corporations created in the Gilded Age also created a tier of middle managers throughout the country, and these managers, in turn, required clerical help. This category of workers included Roosevelt secretaries Missy LeHand (FDR) and Malvina Thompson (ER), although both these women were born in the 1890s, so were slightly younger than the main New Woman generation. Interestingly, both LeHand and Thompson applied their secretarial skills to the public sector, rather than private corporations, before coming to work for the Roosevelts. LeHand worked for the Democratic Party national headquarters, and Thompson worked for the American Red Cross.⁴⁷ Domestic workers also played an important, if underrecognized, role in the Progressive Era. Wealthy married women, overwhelmingly native-born and of European descent, were able to engage in the era’s volunteer reform and suffrage work because other women—mostly African American or immigrant European—performed the labor to keep their households running and their children safe. Although most unmarried women, white or black, could not afford this luxury, Eleanor Roosevelt herself most certainly could, and paid domestic servants did in fact enable her to pursue the work for which she is now remembered.⁴⁸

Not much is known about the women ER employed as domestic help prior to her husband’s election as governor of New York in 1928, save for Blanche Spring, a personal nurse occasionally employed throughout ER’s childbearing years, and a series of British and German nannies hired to help raise for her children.⁴⁹ We also know that in the aftermath of World War I, when the family was living in Washington, DC, ER replaced most of her domestic staff (all white) with new workers (all African American). Biographers have theorized that she made this move in an effort to reduce household expenses (since African Americans were paid less than European Americans), to quell a brewing servant revolt, or to declare her independence from her mother-in-law, who had previously had a strong voice in ER’s hiring decisions regarding servants.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 316, 512–13.

⁴⁸ Kevin M. Burke, Robert Heinrich, and Steven J. Niven, “The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders,” Historic Resource Study (Draft) (Hyde Park, NY: National Park Service, June 2022), 81–100.

⁴⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 178–79.

⁵⁰ Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, “The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders,” 83–84; Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 182–83; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 250.

During the White House years, Lizzie McDuffie, an African American woman, served as one of the housekeeping staff, and Henrietta Nesbitt, a native-born European American, was the head cook.⁵¹ After FDR's death, when ER was living at Val-Kill, she employed a staff of six to care for the house and the grounds, with additional staff hired temporarily for large events.⁵²

* * *

Thus, at all skill levels, the Progressive Era saw an increase in employment opportunities for women. By 1900, approximately 20 percent of adult women were in the workforce. However, this statistic obscures the different experiences of European American and African American women. European American women generally left the workforce when they married; just 3 percent of white married women were wage earners in 1900. In contrast, African American women were far more likely to perform wage labor throughout their adult lives; 40 percent of African American women, married and unmarried, were wage earners in 1900.⁵³

The Progressive Era also saw a shift in many Americans' thinking about the role of government in creating a fair and just society. Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, in fact, was largely about expanding the federal government's role to include elements of a social safety net, business oversight, and labor protections, an expansion that Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt would continue a generation later. Indeed, scholarship on the women's suffrage movement has given significant weight to this changing view of government. If one of the government's duties was to care for society's neediest members, the suffragists argued, then the nation's caretakers—women—needed to be involved in this effort. And to do that, women needed the vote.⁵⁴

Ideals and Realities: ER's Associates

As mentioned earlier, the New Woman was a cultural trope, rather than a reality. But it was a trope that was created to make sense of what to observers felt like a new phenomenon: educated, politically engaged young women eager to contribute to society through

⁵¹ For information on Lizzie McDuffie and the other White House domestic staff, see Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, "The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders," 81–100. On Nesbitt, see Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933–1938* (New York: Viking, 1999), 51–59.

⁵² Quoted in Louis Torres, *Historic Resource Study: Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site (Val-Kill), Hyde Park, New York* (Denver: Denver Service Center, Mid-Atlantic/North Atlantic Team, Branch of Historic Preservation, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1980), 166–67, <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS115622>.

⁵³ Patterson, *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 8.

⁵⁴ Ware, *American Women's History*, 73; Baker, "The Domestication of Politics," 635, 647.

professional work. Considering the experiences of some women who in later decades would be instrumental to the political education of ER can help shed light on the usefulness (and limits) of the New Woman label.

Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman: Teaching and Politics

Nancy Cook (1884–1962) grew up in St. Lawrence County, New York, near the Canadian border. She had artistic tendencies and was particularly skilled in woodworking and photography. Her parents were farmers, but she was able to attend college at Syracuse University (founded in 1870 as a co-educational institution) by selling postcards of photographs she had taken. Later, her photographs and home movies provided much of the visual evidence of the Roosevelts' time at Val-Kill in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵⁵



Nancy Cook, far left, and friends at Syracuse University, circa 1910.
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site.

⁵⁵ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 105–8; Emily Herring Wilson, *The Three Graces of Val-Kill: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nancy Cook in the Place They Made Their Own* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 26.

Marion Dickerman (1890–1983) was born to a prominent family in Oswego County, New York, and she also attended Syracuse University. It was there where Cook and Dickerman met in 1912. They became a couple in 1913 and maintained their partnership for nearly 50 years, until Cook’s death in 1962. Remaining unmarried and/or partnering with another woman was a common characteristic of New Women, although this fact was not overtly part of the original portrayal. It also was not true of all New Women, of course, but in the early 20th century, marriage and children were largely understood to be incompatible with women’s wage labor, and married women who held jobs for reasons other than basic family subsistence were roundly condemned. The preponderance of unmarried women in ER’s social circle is further explored in Chapter 3.

Cook and Dickerman both worked as teachers and were also activists for women’s suffrage. During World War I, they joined the war effort by serving in a military hospital in London. Neither were trained nurses, but Dickerman did whatever unskilled jobs were needed and Cook, a skilled woodworker, made artificial limbs.⁵⁶ After the war, both women became active in the Democratic Party. After a brief run for state office, Dickerman returned to teaching. Cook, after serving as Dickerman’s campaign manager, went to work for the New York Democratic Committee Women’s Division.⁵⁷

The pair met ER in the early 1920s through their political work, and it was with these friends that ER built the original cottage at Val-Kill. Shortly after that, the trio launched Val-Kill Industries, an arts-and-crafts furniture factory designed to provide work to young people in the Hudson Valley who might otherwise migrate to urban areas. Cook headed up this effort, while Dickerman continued to work as a teacher.⁵⁸

Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read: Progressive-Era Professionals

Esther Lape (1881–1981) was born into a Quaker family and grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, and Philadelphia. Educated in the public school system, she received a scholarship to Bryn Mawr (a women’s college opened in 1885) but transferred to Wellesley (a women’s college founded in 1870), graduating in 1905. After college, she taught composition at a series of colleges, including Swarthmore (a Quaker school founded in 1861) and Barnard (a women’s college founded in 1889). During this period, she was also a freelance

⁵⁶ Marion Dickerman, “The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman” (1973), 1–3, 1682 PRCQ vol. 1, Columbia University Oral History Research Office Archive, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscripts Library.

⁵⁷ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 105–7, 134–35.

⁵⁸ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, 105–8, 134–37.

journalist, specializing in immigration and workers' rights. After World War I, she became a vocal advocate in support of the World Court and universal health care, and from the 1920s on her employment centered around these causes.⁵⁹

Elizabeth Fisher Read (1872–1943), Lape's life partner, was born in New Brighton, Pennsylvania, northwest of Pittsburgh. Little is known about her family of origin, but given Read's educational attainment, it is likely she was raised in the middle class. Read graduated from Smith College (a women's college opened in 1875) and went on to earn a law degree at the University of Pennsylvania (which began admitting women to their law school in the early 1880s) and an MA from Columbia University.⁶⁰ Columbia did not regularly begin accepting female graduate students until 1900, when Read was nearly 30, and the subject of her degree from Columbia is not known. Popular graduate subjects for Columbia women in the early 1900s included philosophy, psychology, and anthropology, and given Read's interest in reform and her later legal specialty of international law, it is conceivable that she focused on one of these areas.⁶¹

The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project at George Washington University has stated that Read "typified" the social ideal of the New Woman, "independent, financially self-supporting, politically active, and socially emancipated."⁶² She was an ardent suffragist and was active in the League of Women Voters with Lape; it was through this group that the two women met ER. Read would go on to be ER's lawyer and financial advisor. She also worked alongside Lape in advocating for the World Court, while practicing law for a living.⁶³

Mary McLeod Bethune and the African American New Woman

The Great Migration, in which millions of African Americans left their homes in the rural South to escape the brutalities of Jim Crow and instead pursue economic opportunity in the cities of the North and West, did not begin in force until World War I. As such, most African Americans at the turn of the 20th century lived in rural areas and were confined to menial jobs or sharecropping. The educational and employment opportunities of the

⁵⁹ Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Lape, Esther," in *Notable American Women: Completing the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Ware and Stacy Lorraine Braukman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁶⁰ "Elizabeth Fisher Read (1872–1943)," Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, George Washington University, n.d., <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/elizabeth-fisher-read-1872-1943>; "Elizabeth F. Read, Lawyer and Writer: An Associate of the American Foundation 20 Years Dies," *New York Times*, 1943; "Women at Penn: Distinguished Early Graduates, Faculty, and Benefactors of the University," University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, n.d., <https://archives.upenn.edu/exhibits/penn-people/notables/women>.

⁶¹ Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres*, 86–90.

⁶² "Elizabeth Fisher Read (1872–1943)."

⁶³ "Elizabeth F. Read, Lawyer and Writer"; "Elizabeth Fisher Read (1872–1943)."

Progressive Era did not extend to these Americans.⁶⁴ However, of those African Americans with the resources to move beyond survival mode, many had a commitment to use their advantages by “advancing the cause of the race in a world couched in terms of Jim Crow segregation, blatant sexism, and global imperialism, colonization, and apartheid.”⁶⁵

Recognizing the strength in numbers, African Americans built an extensive system of organizations to enact change and engage with the reformist impulses of the era. African American churches provided solace, community, and a call for social action. African American fraternal orders, such as the Black Elks (officially known as the Improved Beneficial and Protective Order of the Elks of the World), flourished from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, providing community and professional aid networks for urban residents. African American women’s clubs allowed African American women to expand their traditional role as caretakers into the realm of reform and philanthropy.⁶⁶

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized in 1909 to advocate for the rights guaranteed to African Americans under the US Constitution. Eleanor Roosevelt became involved with the group in 1934, after her efforts to ensure racial equality in New Deal programs illustrated to her the extent of the challenges and prejudice African Americans faced. She became a close ally of Walter White, head of the NAACP from 1929 to 1955, and worked with the organization on many civil rights initiatives.⁶⁷

The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) was another organization that advocated for racial advancement in this era. Founded in 1896, the NACW was the first African American secular organization with a national scope.⁶⁸ By 1900, four hundred African American women’s clubs throughout the country were affiliated with the NACW, and the organization’s work included raising awareness about lynching and working for women’s suffrage.⁶⁹ In 1924, educator and activist Mary McLeod Bethune was elected

⁶⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

⁶⁵ Zachery R. Williams, *In Search of the Talented Tenth: Howard University Public Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Race, 1926–1970* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), quotation 2–3.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); David M. Fahey, “African American Fraternal Societies,” Electronic Resource, in *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2020); Nina Mjagkij, “Improved Benevolent Protective Order of Elks of the World,” in *Organizing Black America: An Encyclopedia of African American Associations* (New York: Garland, 2001).

⁶⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 153–54, 161. For more information on White’s relationship with the Roosevelts, see Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, “The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders,” 12–61.

⁶⁸ Alison M. Parker, *Unceasing Militant: The Life of Mary Church Terrell* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 56–57.

⁶⁹ DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes*, 423.

president of the NACW, and this achievement was just one moment in a career dedicated to social justice and racial equality.⁷⁰ Her belief in the power of education and her career dedicated to bettering the lives of the less fortunate situated Bethune within the gender trends of her generation, and she provides one example of the African American New Woman, a figure adopted by the African American press as a way of commenting on changing gender roles while also acknowledging the realities of African American discrimination in the United States in the early 20th century.

Bethune (1875–1955) was born in Mayesville, South Carolina, into extreme poverty, the 15th child (out of 17) of formerly enslaved parents. Nevertheless, against tremendous odds, she received an education and became a teacher, founding a school for African American girls in Florida. She also became active in African American women’s clubs, rising to national leadership in this movement, which in turn brought her into contact with Eleanor Roosevelt.⁷¹ The two first met in 1927 at a National Council of Women luncheon hosted by FDR’s mother Sara. Bethune was attending as a representative of the NACW and was the only African American guest.⁷²

Some years later, as first lady, ER made an effort to educate herself on issues facing African Americans and reached out to numerous civil rights leaders of the day, including Bethune. FDR did the same, assembling a team of African American advisors—including Bethune—colloquially known as the Black Cabinet.⁷³ In 1936, after the National Youth Administration (NYA) was created, Bethune went to work for the New Deal as the head of the NYA Division of Negro Affairs.⁷⁴

Unlike the women discussed previously, Bethune was married, having wed Albertus Bethune in 1898. With him, she had one child, but after nine years together, the couple separated (though they never divorced). As Mary McLeod Bethune explained it, “He could not understand that my soul was on fire to do things for my people.”⁷⁵ We see in this an example of the tensions inherent in New Woman attempts to combine marriage with public engagement.

⁷⁰ Elaine M. Smith, “Bethune, Mary McLeod,” in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁷¹ Smith.

⁷² Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, “The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders,” 62.

⁷³ Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, 70.

⁷⁴ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 47–52.

⁷⁵ Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, “The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders,” 65.



Mary McCleod Bethune, circa 1915, by William Ludlow Coursen.
Florida State Library and Archives, MSC3851.

Bethune's destitute childhood in the Jim Crow South made her an unlikely embodiment of the African American New Woman, which retained an element of relative privilege even as the stereotype jumped races. Another example of the African American New Woman would be Bethune's friend Lucy Diggs Slowe (1885–1937), a fellow educator who became Howard University's first dean of women and worked to desegregate professional networks of women educators. Although orphaned as a child, Slowe was raised by an aunt in relative economic security.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, despite their different circumstances growing

⁷⁶ Susan Ferentinos, "Lucy Diggs Slowe and Mary P. Burrill House, Washington, D.C.," National Historic Landmark Briefing Statement (Washington, DC: Submitted to the National Park Service National Capital Regional Office, 2018).

up, both Slowe and Bethune ended up bearing characteristics of New Women in their adulthood, both having benefitted from expanding educational and professional opportunities for women and dedicating themselves to societal reform.⁷⁷

Lorena Hickok: A Working-Class New Woman

The term “New Woman” had distinctly middle-class connotations and so was not generally applied to poorer, uneducated women. Nevertheless, the generation of women born in the 1870s and 1880s shared some of the same experiences, regardless of class, and they all experienced the shift in dominant gender ideology during their formative years. Thus working-class women were actively involved in remaking the roles and expectations for women during this period, even though their specific behavior generally differed from their middle-class counterparts.⁷⁸

Poorer women were generally denied the opportunities for higher education that were afforded to their middle-class peers. However, they too experienced the expansion of women’s wage labor. In this age when women’s higher education was still so new, some women were also able to obtain professional jobs without a college degree. This was true of 30 percent of the New Deal women in Susan Ware’s study, mentioned earlier. It was also true of ER’s associates Lorena Hickok and Rose Schneiderman.⁷⁹

Lorena Hickok (1894–1968), a journalist and New Deal worker was one of ER’s closest associates, the pair had a romantic relationship beginning in the 1930s. Hickok, whom everyone called Hick, grew up poor and was largely on her own by age fourteen, although a relative did take her in for a few years so she could finish high school. Born in 1894, Hick was younger than the other women profiled here, and so a woman seeking education, engagement with the world, and fulfilling employment would have been less discomfiting by the time she came of age than it would have for a woman born in the mid-1870s, such as Elizabeth Read. All the same, achieving such goals would still have taken determination, particularly for a woman of Hick’s class.

Hick had grown up around working women; her mother, Anna Hickok, was a seamstress, and as a teenager Hick supported herself by working in a boardinghouse, which were generally operated by single or widowed women. Both of these occupations

⁷⁷ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 47–52; For more on Bethune, see Joyce Ann Hanson, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

⁷⁸ See, for example, Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

⁷⁹ Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal*.

were common among working-class women.⁸⁰ But for Hick to finish high school and procure a job as a newspaper reporter—as she did when she was hired by *Battle Creek (MI) Journal* in 1913—was to take an entirely new approach to women’s role in the world. Hick even took a few college classes on her way to becoming a journalist; she attended Lawrence College, founded in 1849 as one of the first coeducational colleges in the country.⁸¹

Indisputably, Hick faced discrimination because she was in the traditionally male field of news reporting; however, she took increasingly more prestigious positions over the course of her 20 years as a journalist. In 1928, she was hired by the New York Bureau of the Associated Press, and it was in this capacity that she first met ER. By 1933, she had grown so close to ER, by then the nation’s first lady, that Hick decided to leave journalism, to avoid any conflict of interest. She instead went to work for the New Deal in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, reporting on social conditions throughout the country as people faced the Great Depression.⁸²

Rose Schneiderman: A New Woman in the Labor Movement

Although Hick chose journalism as her original profession, working-class women were well represented in the reformist political movements of the age, particularly the labor and suffrage movements. Of ER’s friends, Rose Schneiderman (1882–1972) best represents this trend. Schneiderman was born to an Orthodox Jewish family in Poland. Her parents believed in education for both boys and girls and sent Rose to school, in opposition to Orthodox Jewish tradition. She immigrated with her family to the United States in 1890, but when her father died in 1892, the family was plunged into extreme poverty. Rose and her siblings were placed in an orphanage for more than a year before they could be reunited with their mother, Deborah Schneiderman. Even then, Deborah made every attempt to keep the children in school, and Rose was able to complete the ninth grade.⁸³

⁸⁰ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 278; Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

⁸¹ Michael Golay, *America 1933: The Great Depression, Lorena Hickok, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Shaping of the New Deal* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 24–25; Jean Christie, “Hickok, Lorena,” in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Lawrence University, “Lawrence History,” Lawrence University, n.d., <https://www.lawrence.edu/about/history>. Note that Christie give the title of Hickok’s first newspaper as the *Battle Creek Evening News*; however, most other sources refer to it as the *Journal*.

⁸² Christie, “Hickok, Lorena.”

⁸³ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 474–76; Nancy Schrom Dye, “Schneiderman, Rose,” in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Annelise Orleck, “Rose Schneiderman (Jewish Women’s Archive),” *The Salvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, December 1999, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/schneiderman-rose>.



Rose Schneiderman, circa 1910s.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-112772.

However, because of the family's economic situation, Schneiderman left school and began wage labor at the age of 13. She first worked in a department store but was unable to earn as much as she would in a factory job, so after three years she switched over and became a capmaker. In her early 20s, she became active in the labor movement, leading the effort to organize her factory into the first women's local of the Jewish Socialist United Cloth Hat and Capmakers' Union. Through this effort, she became active in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), first working for them as a labor organizer and eventually serving as president of the New York League from 1918 to 1949. Schneiderman believed that working women needed special protection under the law, and this belief led her to also join the fight for women's suffrage beginning in 1913, so that women could advocate for their own interests.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Dye, "Schneiderman, Rose"; Orleck, "Rose Schneiderman (Jewish Women's Archive)"; Elisabeth Israels Perry, *After the Vote: Feminist Politics in La Guardia's New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 19.

ER joined the WTUL in 1922, and it was through this organization that she became friends with Schneiderman. Schneiderman became a regular guest at the Roosevelt homes, and in 1933, FDR appointed her to the labor advisory board of the National Recovery Administration, where she was the only woman member.⁸⁵ Like other women of her generation, Schneiderman believed she could use her talents for the betterment of society, and in this she bears the mark of her generation of reformers. However, unlike the New Women ideal, Schneiderman's family did not have the means to send her to college (or even finish high school), and when in her 20s, Jewish philanthropist Irene Lewisohn, impressed with Schneiderman's talent, offered to pay for her to complete her education, Schneiderman declined, saying she could not accept an opportunity so few of her fellow working women had.⁸⁶

* * *

The late 19th century witnessed the beginning of a significant shift in American understandings of gender, one that was firmly entrenched by the first decades of the 20th century. Although it took multiple generations for these changes to completely take hold, they were experienced most intensely by the women of Eleanor Roosevelt's generation, born in the 1870s and 1880s. During this group's coming of age, the phrase "New Woman" emerged to describe the ways they differed from the women of previous generations. New Women were better educated than previous generations of American women, and they were eager to contribute their labor and their education to the betterment of society, either through reform, professional work, or political activism. Although many desired marriage and children, they saw these roles as complementary to their work in the world, rather than all-consuming.

The New Woman is a cultural trope. She is a stereotype used as a shorthand to describe significant changes in gender roles that occurred in the period between 1880 and 1920. No one woman possessed all her characteristics, and many women of this generation rejected this ideal outright, in favor of an older model of female docility and domesticity. Eleanor Roosevelt was one such woman, adhering to an older ideal of womanhood until the 1920s. Nevertheless, the image of the New Woman captures many of the distinct characteristics of ER's generation, and most of the women who would become her close friends and mentors in the 1920s and 1930s fit this generational model in their life choices and their view of their role within the larger society. To better understand the cultural figure of the New Woman is to better understand the generation to which ER belonged, and which she ultimately came to represent.

⁸⁵ Dye, "Schneiderman, Rose."

⁸⁶ Orleck, "Rose Schneiderman (Jewish Women's Archive)."

CHAPTER TWO

Marriage and Sexuality

The era in which Eleanor Roosevelt was born, came of age, and spent her first years of marriage—the 1880s to the 1920s—was a period of dramatic change in ideas about gender roles, marriage, and sexual satisfaction. Nineteenth-century moral systems were becoming destabilized by the 1880s—fed in part by an industrializing economy, increasing urbanization, and changing demographics. By the 1920s, a new moral order had taken hold. In contrast to 19th-century views of social purity, patriarchal family structure, and sexual reticence, the 1920s advocated for individual fulfillment, marriage based on companionship, and sexual gratification for both men and women.¹

Eleanor Roosevelt, born in 1884 and married in 1905, came of age 20 years before this dramatic shift was firmly entrenched, so one might assume that she would adhere more to a 19th-century ideal of love and marriage and approach her relationship with Franklin Roosevelt (born 1882) accordingly. And, indeed, the Roosevelt marriage began in a manner consistent with such ideals. Eleanor deferred to her husband, believed her role was to support his ambitions, and bore three children in her first four years of marriage, with another three born in the following seven years.²

However, over time, the Roosevelt marriage evolved into something distinctly different than this traditional model. In the aftermath of two life-altering events—Eleanor’s discovery of Franklin’s affair with Lucy Mercer in 1918 and Franklin’s paralysis in 1921—the Roosevelt marriage became decidedly more egalitarian and independent, inspired by an ideal of partnership with room for both husband and wife to have intimate relationships with people outside of the immediate family.³ This marital evolution, while deeply personal, also mirrored the historical changes taking place within US culture more generally. By considering the marriage of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt within the larger context of

¹ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 222–35; Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution: Male Heterosexuality in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women’s Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

² Hazel Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 39–61.

³ Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor*, 119–51, esp. 132.

changing ideas of love, marriage, and sexuality, we gain a richer understanding of the Roosevelts' relationship, their network of close companions, and the leadership they provided in their political lives.

This chapter elaborates the historical context of marriage and sexuality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in order to shed light on the cultural shifts the Roosevelts experienced. It looks at both the older and the newer ideals of marriage, reflects on the ways the Roosevelt marriage conformed and strayed from these ideals, and describes the alternative family they ultimately created.

The 19th-Century Model of Courtship and Marriage

As discussed in the previous chapter, the bulk of the 19th century was marked by a gender ideology known as “separate spheres,” which emphasized differences between men and women and strictly governed socializing between the sexes. This gender differentiation lent an air of mystery to the opposite sex and romanticized heterosexual unions as the joining of complementary forces. Unlike early America, when marriage and family were viewed primarily in economic terms, the 19th century imbued these institutions with romance and the fulfillment of God's will. Love became an essential component of the ideal marriage.⁴

However, although the ideal marriage now involved love, it did not give couples room to be licentious. Marriage manuals and religious commentators warned against sexual excesses, which these sources associated with the lower classes and ethnicities other than Anglo-Saxon. Instead, 19th-century social commentators advocated for “civilized morality,” a moral order structured around sexual temperance and Protestant Christian values. Even married couples were urged to limit sexual activity to procreation.⁵

This ideal of marriage based on love but not on equality or sexual gratification was the prevailing moral standard among the middle and upper classes for most of the 19th century. However, there is ample evidence that it was, in fact, an ideal, rather than a reflection of reality. To begin with, in families with great wealth, the melding or depletion of family fortunes remained a significant consideration in choosing a marriage partner and continued to be as important—if not more so—as questions of love and compatibility.

⁴ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 73–83; Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 87–118; Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 28–55.

⁵ Jonathan Margolis, *O: The Intimate History of the Orgasm* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 274–82; G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 192–214; Ronald G. Walters, *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973).



Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, as part of the wedding party of Helen R. Roosevelt and Theodore Douglas Robinson, 1904. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 4796181(B).

In addition, “civilized morality” existed alongside a relatively “bawdy vernacular sexual culture” among less wealthy sections of society, which historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz describes as “an earthy acceptance of sex and desire as vital parts of life for men and women.”⁶ This subculture was facilitated by the growth of US cities in the late 19th century, creating a critical mass of people looking to engage in illicit activity, including

⁶ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 5.

prostitution, same-sex sexual partners, drugs, and gambling. Whole neighborhoods—referred to by critics as “vice districts”—existed to support these practices, in stark contrast to the calls for moral restraint. And while these areas were generally in working-class neighborhoods, plenty of wealthier people frequented them, even while publicly decrying the breakdown of “moral order.”⁷

Even within marriage, wealthier classes may have agreed with and advocated for sexual temperance publicly, but private writings indicate that they did not always practice it. Letters between 19th-century middle-class couples often referenced sexual gratification, and the one known sexual survey of US women born in the 19th century found that many of the respondents enjoyed sexual activity, had frequent intercourse, and usually experienced orgasms.⁸

The Roosevelts within the Nineteenth-Century Model

James “Taddy” Roosevelt Jr., the son of FDR’s half-brother James, was no stranger to New York City’s vice districts. In 1900, upon turning 21 and coming into his inheritance, he eloped with a prostitute named Sadie Meisinger, whom he had met in the city’s notorious Tenderloin neighborhood. When the news broke, FDR’s father (Taddy’s grandfather) suffered a major heart attack; he died two months later.⁹ In describing the immediate aftermath of the event to her son, FDR’s mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, referenced the strict moral code many 19th-century Americans lived by. She wrote: “Your father cannot get . . . out of his mind the thought that his grandson has been leading a bad wicked life for months. His marrying the creature brings it before the public, but the sin came first and he has disgraced his good name. Poor papa suffered so much in the night for breath that he thought he could not live. He talked of you and said ‘Tell Franklin to be good and never be like Taddy.’”¹⁰

⁷ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 197–223; D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 171–73.

⁸ Christina Simmons, “Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression,” in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 157–77; Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, 56–87; Margolis, *O*, 292; Kathryn Allamong Jacob, “The Mosher Report: The Sexual Habits of American Women, Examined Half a Century before Kinsey,” *American Heritage*, July 1981, <https://www.americanheritage.com/mosher-report>. For other early-20th-century studies of sexuality, see Katharine Bement Davis, *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929); Robert Latou Dickinson and Lura Beam, *A Thousand Marriages: A Medical Study of Sex Adjustment* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Company, 1931); Dorothy Dunbar Bromley and Florence Haxton Britten, *Youth and Sex: A Study of 1300 College Students*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938).

⁹ Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor*, 26–27; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 147.

¹⁰ Quoted in Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor*, 27.

FDR himself, who was 18 at the time, referred to his nephew's actions as "the disgusting thing about Taddy."¹¹ He also, after the six-month mourning period for his father, began looking in earnest for a wife, mentioning at least a dozen women in his diary over the next year. Author Hazel Rowley argues, "He was in a hurry to marry. As he saw it—especially after the ignominious Taddy affair—marriage was his only chance for sexual fulfillment."¹²

By the summer of 1902, FDR was courting Alice Sohier, daughter of a wealthy New England family. The pair seems to have engaged in some manner of physical relationship. They were sometimes left unchaperoned, and Franklin recorded some curious comments in his diary, written in code so a casual reader would not be able to decipher them: "Alice confides in her doctor" and "Worried over Alice all night." Years later, Sohier would recall, "In a day and age when well brought-up young men were expected to keep their hands off the person of young ladies from respectable families, Franklin had to be slapped—*hard*." FDR proposed to Sohier, but she declined.¹³

After Sohier's refusal, FDR began seeing his fifth cousin Eleanor Roosevelt regularly. Franklin and Eleanor had crossed paths occasionally while growing up—Eleanor's father was FDR's godfather—and the pair had been reacquainted the previous summer when they ran into each other on a train. Their courtship appears to have been a bit more chaste than FDR's relationship with Sohier—at least no references survive of premarital sexual exploration. ER and FDR became unofficially engaged in fall 1903 but did not announce their engagement until November of the following year, as Franklin's mother had requested that the pair wait a year, given their young ages.¹⁴

Eleanor and Franklin were married on March 17, 1905, at a ceremony attended by President Theodore Roosevelt, who gave the bride away.¹⁵ For the next 10 years, the couple built a marriage consistent with a 19th-century model. ER became pregnant within the first 6 months of their marriage, and for the next 10 years led a fairly predictable life as an upper-class wife. She strictly adhered to society's conventions, deferred to her husband's desires, and adopted her mother-in-law's views on all things, even going so far as to mimic Sara's "flip, class-bound arrogance and egregious racism," views ER would later dedicate her life to challenging.¹⁶

¹¹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 147.

¹² Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor*, 27–28, quotation 28.

¹³ Rowley, 28–29; see also Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 133–34.

¹⁴ Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor*, 29–38; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 120–61; David Michaelis, *Eleanor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 72–86; "This Is My Story," Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 41–44.

¹⁵ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 162–67.

¹⁶ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 177.

Eleanor Roosevelt bore six children between 1906 and 1916, although one son died in infancy. Six was the number of children FDR had told Alice Sohler he desired, the same number as his idol, Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁷ Given her turbulent upbringing, ER did not have any experience with strong parent-child relationships, and so found herself at a bit of a loss when faced with the task of raising her own children. As she put it, “I had never had any interest in dolls or little children, and I knew absolutely nothing about handling or feeding a baby.”¹⁸ In contrast, FDR’s mother Sara, with whom the family lived, had the utmost faith in her own superiority as a mother, and regaled ER with advice and criticism, while also courting her grandchildren’s loyalty at the expense of ER’s parental authority. As but one stunning example, Sara repeatedly told the Roosevelt children, “I was your real mother, Eleanor merely bore you.”¹⁹

Lacking in confidence as a mother, ER also allowed herself to be bullied by a series of caretakers who were hired to look after the children. Her daughter Anna’s first nurse, Blanche Spring, “a lovely person” who returned to the family after many of the children’s births, supported ER in learning how to care for her children.²⁰ According to ER biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook, “Blanche taught her how to make a bed and bathe a child; how to handle illnesses and accidents; how to use ventilation to safeguard the family against contagion.”²¹ However, the other caretakers ER hired, at the encouragement of her mother-in-law, were harsh disciplinarians who “tyrannized” the young mother.²² Longtime friend Marion Dickerman recalled that ER felt that the three elder Roosevelt children, Anna, James, and Elliott, “had been subjected to types of punishment [by their nannies] that Eleanor felt quite wrong, but never had she had the spiritual or intellectual strength to protest.” As a result, she made an effort to ensure that “Franklin and John [her two youngest children] would have quite different experiences.”²³

These were difficult years for ER. Although she tried valiantly to be a dutiful wife and daughter, ER was often treated as an afterthought in FDR and Sara’s already established life together. In the words of Cook, “Increasingly afloat in a sea upon which she

¹⁷ Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor*, 29; Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 68–69.

¹⁸ “This Is My Story,” Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 57.

¹⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 179.

²⁰ “This Is My Story,” Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 57.

²¹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 101–2.

²² Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 178–79.

²³ Marion Dickerman, “The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman” (1973), 11–12, 1682 PRCQ vol. 1, Columbia University Oral History Research Office Archive, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscripts Library.

never got to chart the course, never fully understood the tides, and could not quite count on her mate for support in a storm, Eleanor found the early years of her marriage to be the loneliest of her adult life.”²⁴

ER was surely not the only woman of her generation to find herself adrift after marriage. The 19th century’s fetishization of the differences between men and women, its delight in romance, and its gender ideals that prized female timidity and deference seem guaranteed to make the transition to married life rocky. Add to that the pressures of childrearing so soon after the wedding, and we can easily see the limits of the 19th-century marital ideal.

There were a few ways that the Roosevelt marriage differed from marriage trends of the era, however. For one, while the balance between extended and nuclear family has shifted repeatedly over the course of US history, Sara Roosevelt’s influence over her son and his bride seems extreme for any era. In addition, ER and FDR had an unusually large number of children for the early 20th century. While the average number of children per family was seven in 1800, this number declined significantly over the course of the 19th century. By 1900, the average number of children per family was 3.5. Historian Viviana Zelizer has explored the economic reasons behind this falling birthrate and argued that middle- and upper-class families began limiting the number of children they had as early as the 1850s.²⁵ In the face of these larger trends, the size of the Roosevelts’ brood suggests that FDR and ER arrived at that number, at least in part, by choice.

²⁴ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 179.

²⁵ Mary P. Ryan, *Mysteries of Sex: Tracing Women and Men through American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 97; Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 3–21.



Eleanor Roosevelt and her son Elliott, 1913.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 47-96:2389.

The Sexual Anxieties of the Gilded Age

By the 1880s, many members of the white elite understood their way of life—including their values—to be under threat. Changing demographics and increasing urbanization challenged the presumed superiority of Anglo-Saxon value systems. Elites responded with renewed zeal for an older moral order, launching social purity reform movements, passing new laws to shore up their moral systems, and harnessing the power of science to support their view of the world.

To begin with, the second half of the 19th century saw significant changes to the demographics of the United States. In the late 1840s, the US victory in the Mexican-American War expanded US territory by about a third, when the United States annexed a half-million square miles formerly part of Mexico. In addition to opening the door to westward migration by people in the East, this acquisition also brought significant numbers of Mexicans and Native Americans under US jurisdiction. Later in the century, the western United States would experience an influx of immigrants from China and Japan, further diversifying the US population. In the 1860s, following the Civil War, the Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution granted the rights of citizenship to formerly enslaved African Americans. And between 1870 and 1915, *27 million* people immigrated to the United States. While a sizable number of these immigrants were of Anglo-Saxon descent,

the majority were from eastern and southern Europe or from other continents. And many of the European immigrants were Jewish, Catholic, or Christian Orthodox, further diversifying the religious as well as the ethnic makeup of the country.²⁶

The overall effect of these demographic shifts was that people of Anglo-Saxon descent decreased as a proportion of the overall US population. Perhaps more importantly, their proportional dominance among the body politic also threatened to decline. To address this threat, those in power enacted a series of laws in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that restricted immigration and curtailed African Americans' voting rights and freedom of movement. The changing ethnic makeup of the US population seemed to elites to threaten their position of social, political, and economic superiority, and so they shored it up with legal infrastructure.²⁷

In addition to changing demographics, the US population was also becoming more urban. Between 1880 and 1900, the number of people living in urban areas of the United States increased by 15 million. In 1880, the combined population of the five largest US cities totaled 3.486 million. A mere 20 years later, the combined populations of the 5 largest cities had more than doubled, to 7.566 million. New York City, the urban center with which ER and FDR were most familiar, experienced even more dramatic growth. Its population nearly *tripled* between 1880 and 1900, from 1.2 million to 3.4 million.²⁸

The growth of cities was primarily economic. As a result of both industrialization and the rise of the professions, jobs became more geographically concentrated. The population followed the jobs, moving from more isolated rural areas to urban centers. However, with increased population density came a breakdown of traditional moral systems, in which community and family enforced common moral standards and supervised individual

²⁶ "Immigration to the United States—American Memory Timeline," webpage, Library of Congress Teacher Resources, n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/riseind/immgnts>; "Immigrants in the Progressive Era—American Memory Timeline," webpage, Library of Congress Teacher Resources, n.d., <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/progress/immigrnt>.

²⁷ Jennifer L. Hochschild and Brenna Marea Powell, "Racial Reorganization and the United States Census 1850–1930: Mulattoes, Half-Breeds, Mixed Parentage, Hindoos, and the Mexican Race," *Studies in American Political Development* 22, no. 1 (2008): 59–96, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X08000047>; Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 148–55.

²⁸ "City Life in the Late Nineteenth Century," Online Lesson Plan, Library of Congress Teacher Resources, n.d., <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/riseind/city>; US Census Bureau, "1880 Fast Facts—History—US Census Bureau," n.d., https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1880_fast_facts.html; Census History Staff US Census Bureau, "1900 Fast Facts—History—US Census Bureau," n.d., https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1900_fast_facts.html; Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 129.

behavior. Cities were too large to provide community surveillance of individuals, and many new arrivals to the city, whether from rural areas of the United States or from other countries, came to the city by themselves, allowing for an unprecedented degree of anonymity.²⁹

Once settled, these individuals were left to make their own decisions, and many chose to engage in behavior that their families would have found troubling. Young women socialized with men they did not know; some exchanged sex for money or gifts; many bachelors spent their time drinking alcohol together, gambling, and visiting prostitutes; and men who preferred sex with other men found others like themselves and established underground cultures where they could meet and socialize. While not all people in urban centers engaged in these activities, enough did to create anxiety among social commentators.³⁰

In a rapidly changing world in which traditional moral order seemed to be breaking down, some people—mostly wealthy whites—joined together to curb what they saw as the excesses of urban life. On the local, state, and national level, activists launched movements to eradicate vice districts; outlaw prostitution, gambling, and the consumption of alcohol; and criminalize sexual practices they disagreed with. Such practices included sex outside of marriage, same-sex sexual behavior, and interracial marriage. Collectively, these various efforts were known as “social purity” campaigns, and historians now understand them as an effort to enforce Protestant Christian, Anglo-Saxon values on the larger, increasingly diverse, populace. Interestingly, in many instances, these campaigns were led by middle-class women. Historian Catherine Cocks argues that such women leveraged the prevailing view of women as the upholders of sexual morality to carve a place of authority for themselves in the public sphere.³¹

²⁹ Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 109–38.

³⁰ D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 109–38; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Chad C. Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³¹ D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 150–56; Jon C. Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City: Problem, Promise, and Reality*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 35–36; Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Catherine Cocks, “Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 2 (April 2006): 93–118.

The Roosevelts within the Context of Late-19th-Century Sexual Anxiety

Both Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt were of the class that felt most threatened by the changes taking place at the turn of the 20th century. Both were from Old Money Protestant families who had long had access to the seats of power. And growing up so close to New York City, they would have had some inkling of the social upheaval taking place—though they were probably shielded from many of the specifics by virtue of their families' wealth. Because both Franklin's mother and Eleanor's grandmother were socially conservative, these women likely would have been supportive of social purity movements, though neither was active in these campaigns. Even more importantly, Eleanor's uncle Theodore Roosevelt (also an important influence on Franklin) was quite vocal in fanning fears of "race suicide" and was a believer in eugenics. These subjects, while rooted in racism, are also intimately linked to sexuality and reproduction, illustrating the conflation many elites made between dark-complected people and moral decay.³²

Yet, despite these influences, Eleanor and Franklin were largely unmoved by the sexual anxiety present within their class during their youth and continuing into their adulthood. While their views grew increasingly liberal over time, at no point did they display the rampant racism of many white elites during this era, nor did they single out the poor as the enemy of American progress. This may have been related to FDR's aspirations as a politician. As historian Ann Mauger Colbert has pointed out, as a Democrat, FDR had many urban dwellers, Catholics, and immigrants in his party, and so may well have avoided voicing too strong an opinion on issues of social purity, just as he avoided taking a clear stand on many controversial issues.³³

Prior to the 1920s, ER privately voiced a range of prejudices against African Americans and Jewish people. In correspondence, she referred to African Americans using a pejorative term and expressed suspicions that African American servants would not behave honorably, indicating that she believed the entire race shared certain characteristics. She also went out of her way in private writing to identify people who were Jewish and to list the ways they adhered to dominant stereotypes.³⁴ However, her prejudices about people who were different from her do not seem to have expressed themselves through

³² Kevin P. Murphy, *Political Manhood: Red Bloods, Mollycoddles, and the Politics of Progressive Era Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jay Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

³³ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 60–62.

³⁴ Kevin M. Burke, Robert Heinrich, and Steven J. Niven, "The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders," Historic Resource Study (Draft) (Hyde Park, NY: National Park Service, June 2022), 83–84; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 390.

sexual anxiety. In addition, this casual racism faded over time, and beginning in the 1930s, ER educated herself on issues facing both African Americans and Jews in Europe. She became a vocal advocate for racial equality and aid to World War II refugees.³⁵

The Invention of Homosexuality

While the proponents of social purity sought to shore up the traditional moral order in the face of changing demographics and increasing urbanization, others sought to prove the superiority of white Protestant elites and their worldview through scientific study. Scientific scholarship in the period between 1880 and 1930 is dominated by an effort to understand the world through the division of people and cultures into categories such as “civilized” or “savage,” “fit” or “unfit,” “superior” and “inferior,” and “normal” or “deviant.”³⁶

It was within this historical context that the idea developed that same-sex attraction was an inborn characteristic signaling pathology. Evidence of same-sex sexual behavior exists throughout recorded history, but prior to the late 19th century, it was understood as simply that, behavior. Some cultures incorporated same-sex sexual behavior into their understandings of sexual expression; others, particularly Western cultures, characterized this activity as sinful and criminal. However, it was only in the late 19th century that this behavior became a sign of a particular type of person, one who was classified as emotionally (and sometimes physically) diseased.³⁷

This characteristic of same-sex attraction was eventually named homosexuality. These ideas began in Europe in the 1860s, but the United States did not enter the discussion until the 1890s, in part because of laws that criminalized the distribution of “obscene” material, the result of efforts by social purity activists.³⁸ Reflecting the social anxieties of their time and place, American scientists emphasized what they believed were the racial and class components of homosexuality, imbuing the classification with stereotypes similar to

³⁵ John F. Sears, *Refuge Must Be Given: Eleanor Roosevelt, the Jewish Plight, and the Founding of Israel* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2021); Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, “The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders.”

³⁶ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and US Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Amy Susan Green, “Savage Childhood: The Scientific Construction of Girlhood and Boyhood in the Progressive Era” (1995); Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia*, 38–43.

³⁷ Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia*, 49–55; Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 73–100; Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 1–4.

³⁸ Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 55–57; Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 40–73; Vern L. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 35–40; Blank, *Straight*, 41–66.

those applied to racial minorities and people living in poverty.³⁹ In the words of historian Jay Hatheway, “The fear was that sexual inverts [also called homosexuals] were symptomatic of a trend toward moral and social decline, and that, in turn, was indicative that American exceptionalism and thus the United States was in deep trouble. . . . Fundamentally, the Gilded Age discussions about the homosexual, as opposed to homosexual acts, became metaphors for a host of concerns about order, harmony, stability, control, tradition, reason, change, gender, truth, God, morality, professional specialization, and authority.”⁴⁰

Interestingly, prior to the invention of homosexuality, the construct of heterosexuality also did not exist. Rather, heterosexuality and homosexuality developed in tandem, as an essential binary delineating the “normal” from the “deviant.” Historian Hanne Blank explains this phenomenon by stating, “When nineteenth-century culture began to perceive a need to manage sexual behavior on a civic level, it also had to devise language and concepts with which to talk about them.”⁴¹

Rise of the Social Sciences

The Roosevelts within the Context of the Invention of Homosexuality

Because early medical constructions of homosexuality were so imbued with racial and class stereotypes, the negative consequences of this diagnosis fell disproportionately on the least powerful members of society. The characterization of homosexuals as degenerate and mentally deranged quite likely convinced many elites that they or people they knew who preferred the company of their own sex—and perhaps even had a life partner of the same sex—were nevertheless *not* homosexual.⁴²

This perspective introduces a possible explanation for the Roosevelts’ approach to homosexuality. Eleanor and Franklin seem to have been quite open to having people in their lives whom we today identify as LGBTQ—Sumner Welles, Nan Cook, Marion Dickerman,

³⁹ Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Julian B. Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880–1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Heather Lee Miller, “Sexologists Examine Lesbians and Prostitutes in the United States, 1840–1940,” *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 67–91.

⁴⁰ Hatheway, *The Gilded Age Construction of Modern American Homophobia*, 7.

⁴¹ Blank, *Straight*, 11; Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton and Company, 1995).

⁴² I am using the term “homosexual” here because it was the word in use at the time being discussed; however, readers should note that in the 21st century this word is often seen as offensive. See Jeremy W. Peters, “Decline and Fall of the ‘H’ Word,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/fashion/gays-lesbians-the-term-homosexual.html>.

Molly Dewson, Pauli Murray, Lorena Hickock, Esther Lape, and Elizabeth Read, to name just a few. Yet, despite decades of championing various misunderstood and maligned segments of society, they never publicly defended people we now refer to as LGBTQ.

In addition, in 1919, Franklin, as assistant secretary of the navy, authorized a sting operation at the naval training center in Newport, Rhode Island, designed to uncover and punish homosexual activity in the US Navy. Good-looking sailors (who had volunteered for the effort) were authorized to seduce other sailors who were suspected of being gay, thereby gathering evidence for such accusations. As a result, dozens of sailors and civilians were arrested, including a prominent member of the clergy. Accusing a local clergy member of sodomy caused a public outcry that led to a US Navy investigation of the operation, which had been authorized and funded by the assistant secretary of the navy's office. FDR's central role in this scandal suggests a belief that homosexual behavior was inconsistent with membership in the military.⁴³

It is conceivable that Eleanor and Franklin simply did not draw the connection between the depravity described in medical constructions of "the homosexual" and the flesh-and-blood people of their social circle. If this were the case, it would explain why Franklin could approve the routing out of "homosexuals" in the navy, while entertaining them in his private homes and sanguinely encouraging his wife to form strong romantic relationships with other women who were quite open in their preference for women.

A gender discrepancy may also have been in play. With the exception of diplomat Sumner Welles, all of the Roosevelts' close LGBTQ friends were women, whereas the navy campaign targeted men. Welles was married to multiple women over the course of his life, and it is unclear the extent to which people knew about his same-sex desires before he was caught up in a homosexual scandal in 1940. Conceivably, the Roosevelts, like many others in the early 20th century, may have been more troubled by the thought of male homosexuality than by female homosexuality. Because of prevailing stereotypes of women being more concerned with the realm of the emotional than the realm of the sexual, many were able to convince themselves that few women would have the physical drive to pursue a sexual relationship with another woman.⁴⁴

⁴³ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 267–71; George Chauncey Jr., "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War One Era," *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1985): 189, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/19.2.189>.

⁴⁴ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 65–67.



Sumner Welles, 1922. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-npcc-07437.

The Rise of Sexual Liberalism

Social purity campaigns continued at least through the end of World War I, but by the 20th century other points of view were gaining traction. A small group of sex radicals, centered in New York City, challenged mainstream codes of sexual morality and experimented with alternative arrangements. The spread of commercial leisure—such as dance halls, amusement parks, moving pictures—enabled young people to meet each other away from the

watchful eye of family, and this in turn facilitated sexual exploration. And changes to US culture—often described as the shift to modernism—lent more weight to personal fulfillment and happiness, instead of an earlier era’s emphasis on moral duty and respectability.⁴⁵

Although it is tempting to summarize these drastic changes in thinking as a shift from “Victorian repression” to sexual liberalism, the last generation of historical scholarship has made clear that this model is far too simplistic. Historians now understand that “we need to situate the era and its discontents in an ongoing, multilateral series of negotiations among shifting bands of unequals.”⁴⁶ Thus there is no clear delineation between the older 19th-century ideal of marriage and the early-20th-century model. In reality, these systems existed simultaneously and only gradually did one replace the other as the dominant ideal.

Sex Radicals

Between the 1890s and the 1930s, so-called sex radicals gained an impressive amount of traction within mainstream society. They were the philosophical children of the 19th-century “Free Love” movement, which had begun in the 1870s and claimed fierce proponents, such as Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to run for president of the United States, in 1872. According to historians John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, “free love referred to the right of all men and women to choose sexual partners freely on the basis of mutual love and unconstrained by church, state, and public opinion.”⁴⁷

By the turn of the 20th century, public opinion was, to some extent, catching up to the early free-love advocates. Writers such as Hutchins Hapgood, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman spread the word about their ideas for egalitarian marriage. Describing the impact of these ideas on the larger society, historian Christina Simmons has stated:

A potent interaction of socialist, feminist, and antiracist radicalism converged with new conceptions of sexuality from the 1910s to the 1930s to produce a period of openness in the United States that allowed sex radicals to convey explosive messages about the centrality of sex to human well-being, about women’s sexual desire and autonomy, and about the sexual rights of African

⁴⁵ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

⁴⁶ Cocks, “Rethinking Sexuality in the Progressive Era,” quotation from 104; John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, “Since Intimate Matters: Recent Developments in the History of Sexuality in the United States,” *Journal of Women’s History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 88–100, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2013.0044>.

⁴⁷ D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 161–63, quotation from 161; Hal D. Sears, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977); Sandra Ellen Schroer, *State of “the Union”: Marriage and Free Love in the Late 1800s* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Joanne Ellen Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women’s Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Americans and same-sex lovers. Radicals envisioned egalitarian sexual relationships that were less centered on marriage and reproduction, more expressive of individual attractions, and more satisfying than they believed Victorian codes had allowed.⁴⁸

Some of these proponents' "radical" ideas—such as companionship within marriage and sexual satisfaction of both parties—soon gained widespread acceptance, as they were incorporated into the 20th-century ideal of "companionate marriage," explored in the next subsection. Other ideas from the sex radicals continued to seem rather extreme for the time. Examples include their rejection of monogamy, their acceptance of same-sex attraction, and their experiments with gender nonconformity. Nevertheless, these elements were quite freely explored among sex radicals, particularly in the center of turn-of-the-century American Bohemianism, Greenwich Village.⁴⁹ Given the Roosevelts' home in Manhattan and, beginning in the 1920s, ER's numerous friends who lived in the Village, there is every reason to believe that ER and FDR were aware of this challenge to "civilized morality."

Rising Divorce Rates and the Ideal of Companionate Marriage

Amid the spread of sex radicals' ideas and the changing courtship practices of the early 20th century, in the 1910s and 1920s, social commentators began raising alarms about the country's skyrocketing divorce rates. In reality, divorce rates remained quite low by contemporary standards. In 1920, eight marriages in every thousand ended in divorce. However, this did represent a significant rate of increase. Forty years earlier, in 1880, when the US Department of Labor Statistics declared that the United States had the highest divorce rate in the world, only three of every thousand marriages ended in divorce.⁵⁰

Interestingly, only a minority of experts thought that the appropriate response to these statistics was to make divorce harder to obtain. Most, instead, saw them as a sign that the institution of marriage was in crisis and thus needed to change. Marriage counseling

⁴⁸ Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern*, 58–59; see also Clare Virginia Eby, *Until Choice Do Us Part: Marriage Reform in the Progressive Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁴⁹ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern*; Eby, *Until Choice Do Us Part*.

⁵⁰ Kristin Celello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth-Century United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 19, 23; Alexander A. Plateris, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics, United States, 1867–1967*, Vital and Health Statistics. Series 21, Data from the National Vital Statistics System, number 24 (Rockville, MD: US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, Health Resources Administration, National Center for Health Statistics, 1973), 9.

began in the United States in the 1930s, but well before that, social commentators were discussing the need for both partners to be happy and fulfilled within the marital union, a concept known as companionate marriage.⁵¹

Influenced by the sex radicals and by more general cultural shifts, by the 1920s, the dominant ideal of marriage in the United States had fundamentally changed. Most people in the United States now dreamed of a marriage where their spouse was also their friend. Ideal marriages in the 1920s involved partnership, personal fulfillment, communication, and sexual satisfaction. Although this vision preceded the term that now describes it, by the late 1920s, experts were describing this goal as “companionate marriage.”⁵² This approach was decidedly new, but in light of increasing divorce rates, it is likely that the idea that personal fulfillment was essential to a happy marriage did not originate with the experts, but with the general population, who then, if their marriages did not meet this criterion, sought a divorce.

The Roosevelts within Sexual Liberalism

Over the course of 40 years, the Roosevelt marriage changed dramatically, and notably, those changes coincided with the changing ideals about marriage described in this chapter. However, the Roosevelts also experienced personal crises that demanded their relationship adapt and evolve.

In 1913, FDR was appointed Assistant Secretary of the US Navy, and the Roosevelt family moved to Washington, DC. To keep up with the relentless round of social calls required of a DC political wife—while also pregnant with her fifth child—ER hired a social secretary in 1914, twenty-three-year-old Lucy Mercer. Mercer was from an old money family that had fallen on hard times. She needed to work, but her social status and background made her particularly well qualified for the position.⁵³

ER and the children lived part-time in Washington, regularly traveling between their home there, Sara Roosevelt’s estate in Hyde Park, New York, and the family’s summer home at Campobello. Sometime during this period, most likely when ER was out of town, FDR and Mercer began an affair. ER found out about it in fall 1918, when FDR was stricken with the flu while visiting troops in Europe. Upon his return, still ill, ER unpacked his luggage and discovered love letters between her husband and Mercer.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ceello, *Making Marriage Work*, 13–43; Rebecca L. Davis, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁵² Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern*; Eby, *Until Choice Do Us Part*; Davis, *More Perfect Unions*; Rebecca L. Davis, “‘Not Marriage at All, but Simple Harlotry’: The Companionate Marriage Controversy,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (March 2008): 1137–63.

⁵³ Resa Willis, *FDR and Lucy: Lovers and Friends* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10–17.

⁵⁴ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 164–68.



Lucy Mercer Rutherford, 1945.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.

ER was devastated by her husband's infidelity and suggested a divorce. This did not come to pass, however. Sara Roosevelt was appalled by her son's behavior and made it clear that if he abandoned his wife and five children, she would cut him off from the family fortune. Mercer was also Catholic, which would have prevented her from marrying a divorced man.

But perhaps most importantly, in 1918, a divorce would have effectively killed any further ambitions FDR had for political office. This final point was argued by Franklin's political advisor Louis Howe, who was then working for FDR at the Office of the Navy.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 227–32; Willis, *FDR and Lucy*, 38–41; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 254.

Ultimately, ER and FDR decided to continue their marriage, and this decision brought with it an effort on both sides to be more understanding of each other. At the same time, ER entered a period of deep introspection. Having lost her motivation to continue as a traditional society wife, she sought a different sense of purpose. In the course of recovering from this marital crisis, the Roosevelts dispensed with the expectations and constraints of their former marriage and moved more into a relationship of near equals. They forged a political partnership that would become legendary.⁵⁶

In the standard telling, the evolution of the Roosevelt marriage stemmed directly from ER's discovery of FDR's affair. However, it is also true that the changes in their relationship coincided with wider historical trends that influenced the entire country's approach to marriage. Given ER's childhood experience of inconsistent love, FDR's infidelity likely would have been a crushing blow at any point in their marriage. But perhaps, the ways in which they moved beyond the betrayal—forming a political partnership, ER becoming bolder in her opinions and actions, FDR encouraging his wife's independence and personal growth—bear the mark of the era in which they occurred.

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin has written about the effect of the affair on ER:

The marriage resumed. But for Eleanor, a path had opened, a possibility of standing apart from Franklin. No longer did she need to define herself solely in terms of his wants and his needs. . . . With the discovery of the affair . . . she was free to define a new and different partnership with her husband, free to seek new avenues of fulfillment. It was a gradual process, a gradual casting away, a gradual gaining of confidence—and it was by no means complete [by 1940, when ER had become first lady]—but the fifty-six-year-old woman being fêted around New York was a different person from the shy, betrayed wife of 1918.⁵⁷

Such a description could also apply to the changes in marriage ideals from the 19th to the 20th centuries. Wives became more independent; their fulfillment began to matter more than it had; and marriage became a more equitable enterprise.

However, there is one element of the Roosevelts' later marriage that does not so closely align with larger trends. In the aftermath of the Mercer affair (or perhaps of FDR's disability as a result of polio), the Roosevelts seem to have created space in their marriage for strong emotional bonds with others. After World War I, they assembled an extensive family of choice, comprised of dear friends as well as romantic partners of one or the other of them. While it is unknown if any of these relationships involved a sexual component, in many ways, this unconventional family resembled the polyamorous vision of the Greenwich Village sex radicals.

⁵⁶ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 230–32.

⁵⁷ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 20.

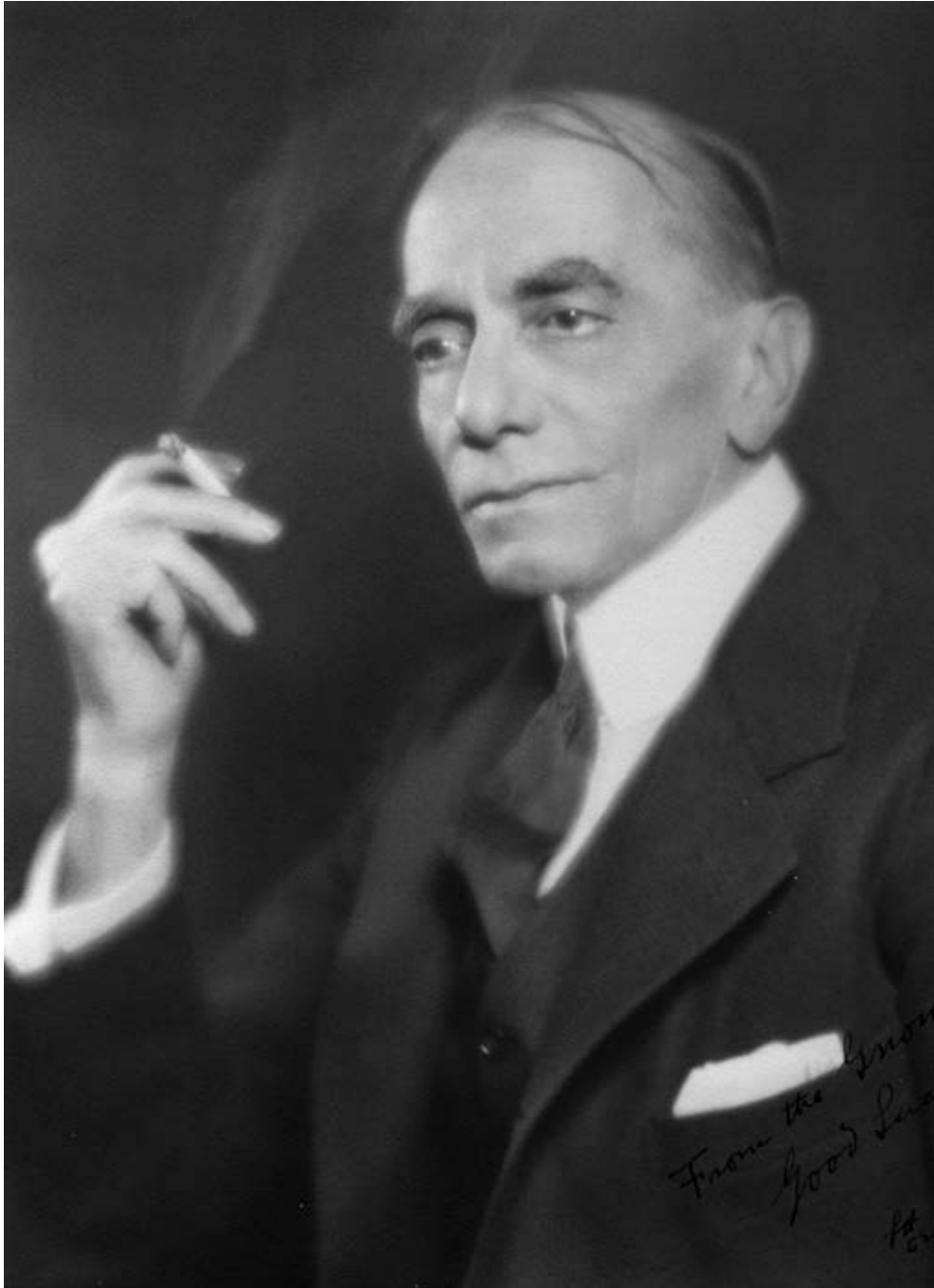
The Roosevelts' Family of Choice

The truth of the matter is that Eleanor and Franklin never lived by themselves. From their wedding in 1905 until FDR was struck with polio in 1921, their homes were filled with their children and with Sara. After 1921, as their children grew and Sara remained a regular presence, they continually added others to their household. Some of the new arrivals were friends of both ER and FDR, some were romances being carried on by Franklin and some were romances carried on by Eleanor, but with few exceptions, all these relationships were conducted in the open, with the consent of both ER and FDR.

Mutual Friends

In the immediate aftermath of FDR's paralysis, his friend and political advisor Louis Howe came to live with the family, to assist ER in caring for Franklin and to keep his spirits up. Howe and FDR had first met when Franklin was a state senator and Howe was part of the press corps. There was a mutual admiration between the two, and they became friends. When FDR became assistant secretary of the navy, he hired Howe to work as his assistant, and Howe continued working for him for the rest of his life. Howe's biographer has argued that it was in the aftermath of FDR's paralysis that Howe fully devoted himself to FDR's political future. And as Howe partnered with Eleanor in the struggle to keep Franklin from giving up on his career and the two became increasingly close, Howe also committed himself to ER's political future.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1993* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 244–64; J. M. Fenster, *FDR's Shadow: Louis Howe, the Force That Shaped Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 133–57; Emily Herring Wilson, *The Three Graces of Val-Kill: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nancy Cook in the Place They Made Their Own* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 19; Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor*, xvii.



Louis Howe, circa 1932.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, JAR 79-76: 56.

Howe recognized both ER's potential as a political operative and her need for a larger life purpose. He became her first political mentor and a trusted friend, sacrificing his own family's happiness to devote himself to facilitating the full realization of FDR and ER's

combined potential.⁵⁹ At the time of FDR's illness, Howe had been offered a prestigious job with New England Oil Company paying \$20,000 a year (about \$325,000 in 2022 dollars), far beyond what he earned working for FDR. But in the face of the Roosevelts' crisis, Howe turned down this job offer, moved in with the Roosevelts, and never again lived with his wife and son, except on visits.⁶⁰

Howe's work with the Roosevelts involved more than simply getting the couple back to where they had been at the end of World War I—with FDR's career on an ambitious trajectory and ER enamored of the purpose-driven public service she had discovered during World War I. In the words of Howe's biographer, "As admirable as Howe's support for the Roosevelts was, in view of the rubble in which he found them, he was not rebuilding what had been there before. He was building something new. . . . Neither Franklin nor Eleanor, each for their own reasons, could revert to life as it was before. Howe had plans to lift each of them up and move them forward; and the rest of the family would have to follow."⁶¹

The Roosevelts owed a tremendous debt to Howe; he advised them all the way to the White House. After FDR was elected president, Howe moved into the White House with the Roosevelts. He lived in the Lincoln bedroom and held the official title of secretary to the president. His devotion to the campaign trail and his smoking habit eventually caught up with him, however, and in 1935, Howe was admitted to Navy Hospital, where he remained until his death in the spring of 1936.⁶²

Another addition to the Roosevelt household in the aftermath of polio was Missy LeHand. The Roosevelts had met LeHand when she worked as a secretary on the 1920 presidential campaign, when FDR was the vice-presidential candidate. After the loss of the election, ER hired LeHand to work as FDR's personal secretary. After his polio diagnosis, her duties expanded. ER took over many of FDR's political duties in an effort to keep the Roosevelt name before the public, and LeHand, in turn, took over many of the duties of running the Roosevelt household.⁶³

⁵⁹ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 141, 155.

⁶⁰ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 127, 133–39.

⁶¹ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 154.

⁶² Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 254–55.

⁶³ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 20–21.



FDR, Missy LeHand, and Grace Tully.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 48-22 3710(338).

Over the years, FDR and LeHand developed a unique relationship. They adored each other, and in many ways functioned as a married couple. LeHand developed an interest in FDR's hobbies, laughed at all his stories, and devoted herself to making his life more comfortable. This relationship did not seem to particularly trouble ER. In fact, one could argue that ER and LeHand functioned as a team, with ER constantly challenging her husband to be the best man he could be and LeHand indulging him exactly as he was. Both were necessary to FDR's happiness, and both women seemed to know that. ER also needed LeHand. According to Doris Kearns Goodwin, "Eleanor knew that, without Missy to attend to Franklin's personal needs, the independent life she had labored to create for herself would be impossible to maintain."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 119–22, quotation 120.

LeHand also lived in the White House with the Roosevelts, until June 1941, when at age 44 she suffered a series of strokes that left her unable to perform her duties or even to speak. She then moved to her sister's house, where she died three years later.⁶⁵

Harry Hopkins was a third mutual friend of the Roosevelts who made the White House his home during FDR's presidency. He was the head of FDR's Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and later transitioned to being head of the Works Progress Administration, a program meant to replace FERA. Meanwhile, as the story went, Hopkins came to the White House one evening for dinner and stayed for three-and-a-half years.⁶⁶ In the words of Ken Burns's documentary, "Able and impatient, fueled by cigarettes and black coffee, Hopkins combined the hard-eyed sensibilities of a seasoned political operative with the conscience of a committed social worker."⁶⁷ As such, he created a sturdy bridge between FDR's political genius and ER's ongoing pursuit of social justice.

Goodwin has offered a partial explanation for the Roosevelts' alternative family, at least during World War II:

The Roosevelt White House during the war resembled a small, intimate hotel. The residential floors of the mansion were occupied by a series of houseguests, some of whom stayed for years. The permanent guests occasionally had private visitors of their own for cocktails or for meals, but for the most part their lives revolved around the president and first lady, who occupied adjoining suites in the southwest quarter of the second floor. . . .

These unusual living arrangements reflected the president's need to have people around him constantly, friends and associates with whom he could work, relax, and conduct much of the nation's business. Through these continual houseguests, Roosevelt defied the limits of his paralysis. If he could not go out into the world, the world could come to him. The extended White House family also permitted Franklin and Eleanor to heal, or at least conceal, the incompleteness of their marriage, which had been irrevocably altered by Eleanor's discovery of Franklin's affair with Lucy Mercer in 1918. There were areas of estrangement, untended needs that only others could fill.⁶⁸

The Roosevelts' alternative family extended well beyond the war years, however. And in addition to the mutual friends described above, both Franklin and Eleanor had special relationships, infused with romance, that they maintained largely independently of each other.

⁶⁵ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 242–46; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 316–18.

⁶⁶ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 37.

⁶⁷ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History. Episode 5: The Rising Road (1933–1939)* (Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2013).

⁶⁸ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 9–10.

FDR's Intimate Friendships

FDR was a person who thrived on attention and adulation, and as ER grew increasingly independent, she was less and less willing to offer these things to him. With Eleanor, Franklin built a political empire, but for flirtatious conversation and uncomplicated devotion, he turned to others. Missy LeHand filled this role for 20 years. There were others as well. During World War II, he developed a friendship, infused with romance, with Crown Princess Martha of Norway, who visited him often. He also grew close to his distant relative Daisy Suckley. With her, he let his guard down and confessed his worries. They built a bond stronger than anyone besides the two of them realized until after FDR's death.⁶⁹

And in his final year of life, FDR returned to his love for Lucy Mercer (now Rutherford, having married and been widowed). Unbeknownst to ER, Franklin and Lucy began dining together occasionally, off the official White House guest list, when the first lady was away from Washington. Mercer, in fact, was among those visiting the president at his cottage in Warm Springs in April 1945 when he suffered the cerebral hemorrhage that killed him. It was, sadly, one final betrayal inflicted on ER by the man she married.⁷⁰ FDR's other relationships, however, seem to have been conducted with Eleanor's blessing, just as her romantic friendships do not seem to have caused any tension between the two.

ER's Intimate Friendships with Women

In middle age, ER expanded her friendship circle and created a warm community of female peers. Of these relationships, her friendship with Nancy Cook, began in 1922, possessed a special fervor. Ten years later, ER would again launch a romantic relationship with a woman, when she became passionately involved with Lorena Hickok. These two relationships, and the wider circle of female friendships of which they were a part, are the subject of the next chapter.

Earl Miller

In between her enthusiasms for Cook and Hickok, ER grew notably close to her bodyguard, Earl Miller. When FDR became governor of New York in 1928, he assigned Miller, a New York state trooper, to accompany ER in her travels after she refused to have a driver.⁷¹ She and Miller developed an intimate friendship over the next four years and continued to

⁶⁹ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 149–54; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 507–8.

⁷⁰ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 517–21.

⁷¹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 274.

be close until ER's death nearly 35 years later. Her son Elliott credited Miller with helping his mother achieve "self-assuredness" and "courage." Her son James speculated that their relationship went beyond the affectionate into the sexual.⁷²

As with so many of ER's closest friends (Lorena Hickok, David Gurewitsch, Pauli Murray) and ER herself, Earl Miller (1897–1973) had a traumatic childhood. He was homeless by the age of 12, and like Hick, survived by working odd jobs. In Miller's case, these jobs required a physicality that he continued to demonstrate later in life. He worked as a stuntman, circus acrobat, contortionist, and boxer. Eventually he joined the US Navy and served in World War I, where he briefly crossed paths with FDR, who was then serving as assistant secretary of the navy. Their paths crossed again in 1928, after Miller had become a police officer and FDR had become governor.⁷³

As discussed in Chapter 4, Miller accompanied ER on her travels throughout the state and mentored her in using her natural lack of pretension to connect with people from a range of backgrounds. He seems to have inspired a silliness and overt joy in ER that she rarely displayed in other parts of her life. The two also openly shared a physical affection that some—such as Marion Dickerman and Nancy Cook—thought inappropriate.⁷⁴

There was some speculation about the exact nature of ER's relationship with Miller—although FDR himself never seemed particularly concerned about it. Shortly before the 1932 election, Miller, then 35, rather unexpectedly married 17-year-old Ruth Bellinger. He later stated that his motive in doing so was to quell the rumors about his relationship with FDR's wife. A short time later (after the election), Miller had the marriage annulled.⁷⁵ There were other marriages, before and after ER, but none was particularly long-lasting.

⁷² Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 53.

⁷³ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 278; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 339–40.

⁷⁴ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 277–78.

⁷⁵ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 276.



Earl Miller and ER, Chazy Lake, New York, 1934.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 48224185(68).

When the Roosevelts moved to the White House, Miller no longer served as ER's bodyguard, but their bond continued. He had a key to her Greenwich Village apartment, and they often spent time together there (as did ER and Lorena Hickok). Miller also had a small house in the Adirondacks, which ER helped decorate and visited often. Some historians, notably David Michaelis, have suggested that Miller took advantage of ER's generosity and adoration, but in truth, Miller demonstrated an ongoing respect for ER and made a point of never profiting off of his association with the Roosevelts, even after their deaths. Nevertheless, some mystery still surrounds the pair's relationship; their extensive correspondence did not survive their deaths, and so some details of their bond will likely always remain unknown.

David Gurewitsch

ER's capacity for love continued throughout her life. In her 60s, she began an intense relationship with David Gurewitsch, a Swiss immigrant 18 years her junior. They adored each other, and while their friendship does not seem to have involved sexual expression and did not preclude Gurewitsch from romantic relationships with other women, Gurewitsch was ER's closest companion in her final years.⁷⁶

David Gurewitsch (1902–74) was born into a Russian-Jewish family in Switzerland. He was officially without a home country until the age of 44.⁷⁷ He was a medical doctor, having trained in Switzerland and practiced in Palestine before coming to the United States in 1936 on a research fellowship. He chose to remain in the United States, although he made frequent visits to Europe. He married an Englishwoman, Nemone Balfour, in 1937, and they settled in New York City. Their daughter was born in 1940. During World War II, he struggled to help his mother, brother, and brother's family—all Jewish and living in Berlin—to escape from Nazi Germany. They were ultimately granted asylum in the United Kingdom in 1941.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 219–21.

⁷⁷ Edna P. Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls: The Friendship of Eleanor Roosevelt and David Gurewitsch* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 16–17.

⁷⁸ Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 14–21.



David Gurewitsch.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 77-55(170).

Gurewitsch and ER officially met in 1945, through her friend Trude Lash, who was a patient of Gurewitsch. In the aftermath of FDR's death that spring, ER was moving back to New York, with the plan of splitting her time between Manhattan and Val-Kill. She asked Gurewitsch to be her physician. In 1947, ER was planning a trip to Geneva to attend a meeting of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and discovered that Gurewitsch was also planning to travel to Switzerland, to receive some medical treatment. They decided to fly over together, but their flight experienced extended delays, first in

Canada and then in Ireland, four and a half days in all. During the layovers, ER and Gurewitsch had a chance to get to know each other better and began to develop a strong bond.⁷⁹ In the words of Edna Gurewitsch, David's second wife,

David and Mrs. Roosevelt found they needed each other. Deeply intuitive as they were, it was not long before they understood each other's hearts, yearnings, and subtle ways. As they grew closer, he helped dispel the infrequent dark moods that gripped her when she had irrational feelings of uselessness. Above all, he was the one who eased her loneliness and gave her the tenderness, so much a part of his nature, for which she had always longed. On her part, Mrs. Roosevelt fortified David's confidence, advised him about practical matters and impractical love affairs. She commiserated with him regarding his indecisiveness and his complaints of overwork, toothaches, and head colds. In fact, they took care of each other.⁸⁰

Gurewitsch's first marriage was not a happy one, and he and Nemone divorced in the mid-1950s. He met his future second wife, Edna Perkel, a Manhattan art dealer, in 1956 through mutual friends. The two were wed in early 1958. Although ER had met Edna and hosted the pair as guests on numerous occasions, she was apparently "despondent" upon learning of their engagement. However, she eventually accepted the news and even hosted the couple's wedding at her apartment in Manhattan.⁸¹ Shortly after the wedding, the couple and ER decided to buy a house together at 55 East Seventy-Fourth Street in Manhattan. ER lived in separate quarters, but the arrangement ensured that ER's final years were spent in good company, with people she loved.⁸²

Nearly a decade after ER's death, Gurewitsch asked ER's friend Esther Lape to review the correspondence between he and ER, as part of deciding whether to share it with Joseph Lash, who was working on a book about ER's relationships. After reading the letters, Lape summed up their relationship: "You were dearer to her, as she not infrequently said, than anyone else in the world. Yes, she not only loved you, she was 'in love' with you. You loved her and were not in love with her. But this is the story of a truly great love that confers nothing but honor upon you and upon her."⁸³

* * *

⁷⁹ Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 13–21; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 219.

⁸⁰ Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 6–7.

⁸¹ Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 84–101, 114–44; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 226–28, quotation 227.

⁸² Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 220–21; Shannon B. Butler, *Roosevelt Homes of the Hudson Valley: Hyde Park and Beyond* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2020), ch. 5.

⁸³ Quoted in Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 5.

Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt lived through a fundamental realignment of American views of sexuality. Their marriage spanned the rise of the modern view of marriage, which emphasizes personal fulfillment and sexual satisfaction over adherence to religious or community standards. The Roosevelt union reflects this shift. The first 15 years of their marriage were modeled on a traditional view of male dominance and providership coupled with wifely devotion and childrearing. In the aftermath of the personal tragedies of the Mercer affair and polio—and amid the cultural shift to modernism—the Roosevelt marriage changed to one that more closely resembled the companionate ideal. They became partners in life and politics.

CHAPTER THREE

Eleanor Roosevelt's Female World

During a difficult and lonely childhood, Eleanor Roosevelt's time at Allenswood School, which she attended from ages 15 to 18, was a bright spot. There, she entered into a female world where she was admired, and her intellectual capabilities were respected. Twenty years later, she would find similar grounding and inspiration among the women active in New York social welfare and politics. They would become her friends, her mentors, and her co-conspirators in her efforts to provide safeguards for the needy and expand the role of women in public life. The emotional support ER received within this circle was a critical component of her development as a leader and a public figure. ER herself stated, "My friends are responsible for much that I have become."¹

In a professional sense, these women were greater than the sum of their parts. Working together to affect change, ER and her friends accomplished great things. In the words of historian Susan Ware, "The outstanding characteristic of women's participation in the New Deal was the development of a "network" of friendship and cooperation among the women, which maximized their influence in politics and government. This network, which had its roots in a generation's common experiences in the woman suffrage campaign, Progressive reform movements, and political and social welfare activities in the 1920s, flourished within the experimental climate of the New Deal."²

This chapter considers the impact these women-centered activities had on the women who took part in them. It pays particular attention to the same-sex romances and life partnerships of these women, in an effort to understand why such relationships were so commonplace among professional women in the early 20th century.

Before proceeding, a note on terminology is in order. Throughout this chapter, I use the word "romantic" to describe relationships that moved beyond mere companionship and affinity. They involved a fervent desire to be in each other's company, expressions of love, and pledges of ongoing devotion. In most cases, historians simply have no way of knowing whether these relationships involved sexual desire, but many did leave evidence of physical affection. These relationships are significant and should not be relegated to the same category as the more familiar realm of platonic friendship.

¹ Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), xiv; On women in New York politics during this era, see Elisabeth Israels Perry, *After the Vote: Feminist Politics in La Guardia's New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

² Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 2.

Women in ER's Early Life

Within 19th-century gender roles, childrearing was the domain of women, and ER's childhood was no exception. Although she idolized her father, the day-to-day business of raising her and her brothers fell to her mother and female servants in her early life. Indeed, her father lived apart from the family for long periods of time, as he struggled to break his addictions to alcohol and opiates and regain his mental health. ER had a troubled relation with her mother, who expressed disappointment in her oldest child's lack of gaiety and lack of conventional beauty. Describing her mother's opinion of her, ER later in life would say, "She often called me Granny, I was without beauty and painfully shy and I seemed like a little old woman lacking in the spontaneous joy and mirth of youth."³

Upon her mother's death when ER was eight years old, the children were sent to live with their maternal grandmother, Mary Ludlow Hall. Although her grandmother was strict, ER's aunts, Pussie, Tissie, and Maude "devoted themselves to the happiness of their orphaned niece." The result was "a female world dominated by her aunts and their friends, who were solicitous of the little girl's sensibilities."⁴

There is some suggestion that ER experienced her first female crush in early adolescence while living with her mother's family. She became quite attached to Alice Kidd, 12 years ER's senior and a friend of the older Hall women. As ER described it in her memoir *This Is My Story*, "I thought her one of the most beautiful and certainly one of the kindest people I knew as a child, and if she was expected I would walk half a mile or more to our entrance for the pleasure of driving in with her and seeing her before she was swallowed up by the older people. I was a little self-conscious about this devotion and I doubt if she ever knew or if any of the others knew."⁵

Although Mary Hall did not particularly approve of ER's extended family on her father's side, Elliott Roosevelt's siblings were also a regular presence in her life. ER's paternal aunts Anna (called Bamie or Bye) and Corinne took an interest in the girl's education and social development and provided examples of women who were forthright and engaged in the world, in contrast to the Hall women, who took a more passive and retiring approach. ER was also a particular favorite of Elliott's brother, Theodore Roosevelt.⁶

³ Quoted in Jan Jarboe Russell, *Eleanor in the Village: Eleanor Roosevelt's Search for Freedom and Identity in New York's Greenwich Village* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 17.

⁴ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 94–95.

⁵ Roosevelt, "This Is My Story," 360–61, quoted in Cook, 95–96; "Alice Kidd, 1876–1948," FamilySearch, <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/GZ7Y-1Y6/alice-kidd-1876-1948>.

⁶ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 91–92; Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 115–16.



Marie Souvestre, undated. London School of Economics Library.

The Roosevelt aunts, in fact, were partly responsible for ER being sent to Allenswood Academy in England when she was 15. Anna and Elliott had planned to send their daughter to school in Europe when she was older, and after Elliott's death, his sisters

urged Mary Hall to send ER to Allenswood, a school ran by Marie Souvestre, who had been a beloved teacher to Bye Roosevelt during her own schooling. It took some convincing, but eventually Mary Hall agreed and in 1899 Eleanor Roosevelt set sail for England.⁷

Headmistress Souvestre was originally from France, the daughter of philosopher Emile Souvestre.⁸ Her first school, Les Ruches, was located outside Paris and followed a similar approach to its successor, Allenswood, located in Wimbledon Park, outside London.⁹ Unlike many upper-class girls' boarding schools of the era, which were primarily finishing schools teaching manners and enough culture to ensure that students could hold their own in upper-crust drawing rooms, Allenswood provided a high-quality education to its students. It was there that Eleanor Roosevelt's world opened and her confidence began to grow.¹⁰

Souvestre challenged her pupils to think for themselves and to defend their opinions using rigorous analysis. She developed a particular fondness for ER and regularly included the girl at her dining table and evening salon. She encouraged ER to dress more becomingly and to get in better touch with her own feelings. During various school breaks, the pair even traveled throughout Europe together, Souvestre encouraging ER to try new things and explore independently.¹¹ ER considered her one of the most influential figures in her youth and recounted that "traveling with Mlle. Souvestre was a revelation. She did all the things that in a vague way you had always felt you wanted to do."¹² Throughout her career, ER kept a portrait of her beloved mentor on her desk.¹³

In her 30s, ER would develop a vibrant network of female friends and mentors who were partnered with other women, but Marie Souvestre may well have been the first woman in ER's life who fit that description. Souvestre had founded Les Ruches, her first school, with Caroline Dussaut, who was also Souvestre's romantic partner. After Dussaut and Souvestre parted ways and Les Ruches closed, Souvestre opened Allenswood, where she appears to have been romantically involved with Pauline Samaia, the school's Italian

⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 99–101; David Michaelis, *Eleanor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 46–47.

⁸ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 52.

⁹ Michaelis, 47; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 103.

¹⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 103–10.

¹¹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 103–16.

¹² Roosevelt, "This Is My Story," *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 30; "June, 1941," FDR: Day by Day, n.d., <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/daybyday/resource/june-1941-3>.

¹³ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 123.

teacher and business manager.¹⁴ Biographer David Michaelis describes Samaia as Souvestre's "nurse, selfless companion, and emotional caretaker."¹⁵ And in her autobiography, ER stated that Samaia "adored Mlle. Souvestre and waited on her hand and foot."¹⁶

Indeed, romance seems to have been a common element of the culture at Souvestre's schools. One student, Corinne Robinson, who attended Allenswood with ER, wrote, "Saturdays we were allowed a sortie into Putney which had stores where you could buy books, flowers. Young girls have crushes and you bought violets or a book and left them in the room of the girl you were idolizing." She added, "Eleanor's room every Saturday would be full of flowers because she was so admired."¹⁷ Similarly, the novel *Olivia, a roman à clef*, describes a student's romantic idolization of her school's headmistress. *Olivia* was written by Dorothy Strachey Bussy, who had been educated at Les Ruches and taught Shakespeare at Allenswood. The novel, written in 1933 and published in 1948, is widely understood to be autobiographical and its headmistress to be modeled on Souvestre.¹⁸

Scholar Martha Vicinus has argued that the culture of romance and crushes that inhabited turn-of-the-20th-century boarding schools helped young women of this era step into a life of public service, by encouraging both the adoration of women who were farther along the path to this ideal and the control required to resist any desire for physical expression of these feelings. Describing the prevailing approach to such relationships, Vicinus writes, "One did not give up on love but used it to further self-knowledge and self-control."¹⁹ Nevertheless, it seems more than likely that such feelings *did* at times find expression in physical affection. Lesbian poet Natalie Barney (1876–1972) attended Les Ruches and recounted "playing at being a page with one particularly pretty girl at school who began to call Natalie her husband." And in the preface to *Olivia*, Bussy wrote, "I knew well enough that my 'crush' was not a joke. And yet I had an uneasy feeling that, if not a joke, it was something to be ashamed of, something to hide desperately."²⁰

¹⁴ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 47.

¹⁵ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 54.

¹⁶ Roosevelt, "This Is My Story," *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 21.

¹⁷ Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin: Leaders of Our Time*, originally published 1971 (New York: Smithmark, 1995), 84.

¹⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 103–4, 116–17.

¹⁹ Martha Vicinus, "Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 600–22, quotation from 605.

²⁰ Quoted in Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 119.

Meeting Political Women

ER returned to the United States when she was 18, in order to come out into society. Even at this young age, ER was more interested in serious issues than in the traditions of high society, and she described her coming out experience as “utter agony.” She went on, “I knew I was the first girl in my mother’s family who was not a belle and, though I never acknowledged it to any of them at that time, I was deeply ashamed.”²¹

Luckily, there were a few other society women who were also interested in the world around them, and ER befriended them. As mentioned in Chapter 1, even before the entry of women into the professions, women were active in civic organizations and philanthropy. In the early years of the 20th century, middle-class women were entering the workforce and seeking to solve society’s problems with their professional training. However, many upper-class women, with no need to work for wages, continued the tradition of women’s volunteerism.

Mary Harriman Rumsey

Mary Harriman (later Rumsey, after she married Charles Cary Rumsey in 1910) was a few years older than ER but part of the same social circles. With some fellow debutantes, she founded the Junior League for the Promotion of Settlements (later shortened to the Junior League) in New York in 1901. The group’s aim was to provide an outlet for young society women to contribute to the betterment of society. ER joined the league in 1903 and volunteered at the College Settlement, a settlement house that the league had chosen as the focus of its work. This time at the settlement was ER’s first exposure to the issues facing New York’s urban poor. ER and Harriman Rumsey continued their friendship throughout adulthood. Rumsey continued to be involved in cooperative efforts, and during the New Deal, FDR appointed her to chair the Consumers’ Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration.²²

Isabella Selmes Ferguson Greenway

ER stopped her settlement work when she married FDR in 1905 and was not active in reform work or politics again until the US entry into World War I in 1917. She did, however, stay in close touch with a friend of hers from childhood, Isabella Selmes Ferguson Greenway. Greenway was also from a wealthy family. She served as one of ER’s bridesmaids

²¹ Roosevelt, “This Is My Story,” *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 37.

²² Persia Campbell, “Rumsey, Mary Harriman,” in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950*, ed. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul Samuel Boyer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 469–70.

in 1905 and married Bob Ferguson, another dear friend of ER's, that same year. While in New York, Isabella was active in a number of women's clubs, and when she and Bob moved to New Mexico in 1910, in an effort to help Bob's tuberculosis, she joined the Silver City (NM) Woman's Club. This organization vocally supported women's suffrage, and beginning in 1913, Isabella also became active in this movement.²³

ER, on the other hand, did not have a strong opinion about women's suffrage. FDR, as a state senator in 1911, came out in support of suffrage, and ER, in response, was "somewhat shocked, as I had never given the question serious thought." She "took it for granted that men were superior creatures and still knew more about politics than women." But "I realized that if my husband were a suffragist I probably must be, too."²⁴

Greenway (then Ferguson) also volunteered for the war effort during World War I, as did ER. In New Mexico, Isabella was appointed by the governor to head the Women's Land Army, an effort to harness the labor of women to keep food production flowing in the state while male farmhands were serving in the military.²⁵ On the other side of the country, in Washington, DC, ER renewed her sense of life purpose during the war, spending long days volunteering for a variety of Red Cross initiatives to help the war effort.²⁶

Bob Ferguson died in 1922, and Isabella moved to Arizona, where she married John Campbell Greenway in 1923. They were only married for three years, however, before he, too, died. After John's death, Isabella increased her political activism, becoming Democratic national committeewoman for Arizona in 1928 and giving a speech in support of FDR at the 1932 Democratic National Convention. In 1933, she was elected to the US House of Representatives, where she served until 1936.²⁷

²³ Sylvia Ramos Cruz, "Biographical Sketch of Isabella Selmes Munro-Ferguson," in *Biographical Database of NAWSA Suffragists, 1890-1920*, Part III: Mainstream Suffragists—National American Woman Suffrage Association (Women and Social Movements Electronic Resource, n.d.); Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 217-18.

²⁴ Quoted in Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 195.

²⁵ Cruz, "Biographical Sketch of Isabella Selmes Munro-Ferguson."

²⁶ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 150-54.

²⁷ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 217-18.



Mary Harriman Rumsey, ER, and Isabella Greenway, 1934.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-hec-46996.

The League of Women Voters

Shortly before FDR's paralysis in 1921, ER made her first tentative entry into political work. She had been inspired by her public engagement during the war but was thrown off course in fall 1918 when she discovered her husband's affair with Lucy Mercer. In the ensuing years, FDR and ER renegotiated their relationship, and ER made an effort to develop an identity and sense of purpose beyond her husband and children. In 1920, she joined the League of Women Voters, a nonpartisan group formed by suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt in the aftermath of the 19th Amendment, to educate women about their new civic duties and to advocate for women's interests within both political parties. Although the organization was nonpartisan, in the early 1920s, the New York league was 75 percent Republican, a reflection of the fact that Republicans had been far greater

supporters of women's suffrage. Nevertheless, in 1921, ER (a Democrat) entered the leadership of the organization when she assumed the chair of the New York State Legislative Committee.²⁸

That same year, 1921, her political work hit another setback, however, when FDR contracted polio in August and lost his ability to walk. For many months, she was occupied with his recovery, but FDR's political advisor, Louis Howe, encouraged her to continue her work in the world and specifically urged her to become active in the Democratic Committee's Women's Division. She took Howe's advice, and beginning in 1922, ER immersed herself in political work, women's issues, and a strong network of women friends who mentored and supported her as she grew into the woman who would transform the role of first lady.

Love and Partnership in ER's Circle

Among ER's close friends were three life partnerships. Molly Dewson and Polly Porter shared their lives with each other for more than 50 years, as did Nan Cook and Marion Dickerman. Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read were together for at least 20 years. All these pairings lasted throughout the women's lives, ending only with the death of one partner. In addition, both Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins had special relationships with particular women. ER's friendships with Nan Cook and Marion Dickerman in the 1920s and with Lorena Hickok in the 1930s were intense and infused with romance. Perkins was lifelong friends with Mary Harriman Rumsey, and the two women lived together in Washington, DC, in the 1930s, and socialized as a couple. Whether or not these relationships were sexual, they were paramount aspects of these women's lives and warrant further consideration.

Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read

ER biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook has labeled Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read ER's "first feminist friends." ER met them both in 1920, through her volunteer work for the League of Women Voters. When she became chair of the league's New York State Legislative Committee, ER worked closely with Read, who was at that point more experienced with politics than ER. A warm friendship between the two developed, and Read became her financial advisor and her lawyer.²⁹

²⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 274–82; Jo Freeman, *A Room at a Time: How Women Entered Party Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 124–29, statistic 126.

²⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 292–93.

Lape, raised Quaker and dedicated to the cause of peace, worked within the league to advocate for the World Court. She was also a journalist, writing articles about immigration and worker rights. For all these reasons, Edward Bok invited her to chair the selection committee for a peace prize he established in 1923. Bok, the former editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, offered \$50,000 for the best plan of how the United States could "do its share toward preserving world peace." Lape chaired the committee, and ER also served. The winning plan, by Charles E. Levermore, called for US adherence to the World Court and cooperation with the United States.³⁰

The late 1910s and early 1920s were a time of strong isolationist feeling in the United States, and international cooperation was not a very popular topic. The Senate Special Committee on Propaganda called for an investigation of Bok and the peace prize committee. Lape was called to testify before the committee, and ER accompanied her for moral support. The experience drew the two friends closer; they continued to advocate for the World Court, and this formative period working for international cooperation set ER on a path that would eventually lead to her serving as a US delegate to the United Nations, formed in the aftermath of World War II.³¹

Read and Lape were life partners when ER first met them in 1920 and they remained so for the next 23 years, until Read's death in 1943. Their partnership does not seem to have discomfited ER, and in fact, in the 1920s, she spent several evenings a week with the couple in their apartment at 20 East Eleventh Street, in Greenwich Village. ER even invited Lape and Read, who did not hide the fact that they were a couple, to visit her for a few days at Springwood. ER recalled, "My mother-in-law was distressed. I had begun to realize that in my development I was drifting far afield from the old influences."³²

³⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 342–44.

³¹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 344–46.

³² Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, ch. 8.



Esther Lape, 1924.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-npcc-25287.

Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman

In 1922, while FDR was recovering from polio, Louis Howe encouraged ER to get involved with the Women's Division of the New York Democratic Committee, as both a means to further her political education and a way to keep the Roosevelt name in people's minds, in case FDR ever recovered enough to run again for office. The idea was reinforced when Nancy Cook, a friend of Howe's, invited ER to give a speech at a women's division luncheon. ER gave the speech and began working with the Women's Division, encouraging women to become politically active and support the Democratic party. Through this work, she developed an intense friendship with Cook and, to a lesser extent, with Cook's life partner, Marion Dickerman. The couple was instrumental in ER's personal and political awakening. Within a few years, the trio had built Val-Kill Cottage together, started Val-Kill Industries, and taken over ownership of the Todhunter School in New York City.

Cook and Dickerman were both from upstate New York and had met while they were students at Syracuse University. Partnered since 1913, they had first become active in politics through their work in support of women's suffrage. During World War I, the pair traveled to England to serve the war effort by working with injured soldiers at a hospital. Upon their return from London in 1919, Dickerman became the first woman ever to run for the New York Legislature, when she entered a campaign for a State Assembly seat from Oswego County, with Cook serving as her campaign manager.³³

Dickerman had been loosely affiliated with the Republican party up until this time, but she ran as a Democrat, in an effort to defeat the Republican incumbent Thaddeus C. Sweet, then Speaker of the State Assembly, who was a vocal opponent to protective legislation for women and children.³⁴ The question of protective legislation was a hotly debated issue among former suffrage activists in the aftermath of women achieving the right to vote. One wing of the movement supported these laws, which would allow for women to be active in the workforce and in public life, while also providing allowances for their unique position as mothers and as women (at that time understood to be "the weaker sex"). The other, much smaller, wing of the movement advocated for equal treatment under the law, introducing a national Equal Rights Amendment in 1923.³⁵

Most women active in formal politics in the 1910s and 1920s supported the idea of protective legislation and resented activists and organizations who fought against it on the grounds that women should be treated equally to men. The equality wing was primarily represented by the National Women's Party, led by activist Alice Paul, leading Frances

³³ Emily Herring Wilson, *The Three Graces of Val-Kill: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nancy Cook in the Place They Made Their Own* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 22–25.

³⁴ Marion Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman" (1973), 5–6, 1682 PRCQ vol. 1, Columbia University Oral History Research Office Archive, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscripts Library.

³⁵ Jo Freeman, *We Will Be Heard: Women's Struggles for Political Power in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), ch. 11.

Perkins, when she was Secretary of Labor, to state: "It is with great regret that some of us recognize that the small group of women in the National Woman's Party who were in favor of suffrage and who worked with us for suffrage, should have taken this doctrinaire position which makes more difficult the passage and maintenance of legislation aimed to improve the conditions of their working sisters, which was one of the primary reasons why many women wanted to vote and many wanted to have them vote."³⁶

Along with Perkins, Dickerman and Cook also fell into this camp even before the final ratification of the 19th Amendment. The 1919 campaign against Sweet was in fact based on their support for protective legislation, and although Dickerman lost the election, she proved to be a more competitive candidate than anyone had expected. As Sweet's lead in the campaign began to lessen, he resorted to then-common tropes against reformers and suffragists. In Dickerman's own words,

As the time of the election approached, poor Mr. Sweet became more and more nervous, and I was accused, and women like me, of being responsible for the race riots in Chicago, the police strike in Boston, and the "nationalization of women." I wasn't quite sure what the "nationalization of women" meant, and so the one time that I talked with Mr. Sweet, I said "I'd like to have that explained." I also wanted to draw his attention to one oversight, and that is, I hadn't been held responsible for the French Revolution and I thought that ought to be added.³⁷

Although Dickerman lost the race, both she and Cook had gained the attention of New York Democrats. Dickerman returned to teaching while also staying active in Democratic politics; Cook went to work for the Women's Division of the New York Democratic Committee. ER's friendship with the two was inextricably linked to this organization; it was also expressed through place—through Val-Kill, the Todhunter School where both ER and Dickerman taught, and Greenwich Village, where ER built her independent identity among New Women and nonconformists. In the 1920s, Cook and Dickerman shared an apartment at 171 West Twelfth Street, three blocks from Lape and Read's apartment. Cook and Dickerman's relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt, and their shared home at Val-Kill, are discussed in Chapter 5, "The Uses of Val-Kill."

³⁶ Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal*, 3–17; Freeman, *We Will Be Heard*, ch. 11, Perkins quoted in Freeman.

³⁷ Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman," 8.



ER, Nancy Cook, and Marion Dickerman, 1933.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 67-116(1).

Molly Dewson and Polly Porter

Molly Dewson (1874–1962) has been called “America’s first female political boss,” because of her role in securing government positions for women during the New Deal. She and ER met in 1925, when Dewson worked for the Women’s City Club and ER served as the group’s vice-president. They became close friends, and ER eventually facilitated Dewson’s entry into party politics when she asked Dewson to work on the 1928 presidential campaign of New York Governor Al Smith.³⁸

When FDR was elected New York governor that same year, Dewson and ER worked behind the scenes to convince him to appoint Frances Perkins as the first woman industrial commissioner of New York, and they employed a similar strategy four years later to convince the new president to appoint her US Secretary of Labor.³⁹ Dewson joined the Women’s Division of the New York Democratic Committee in 1930, again at ER’s urging, during FDR’s campaign to be reelected governor of New York. In spring 1933, Dewson accepted the job as the director of the Democratic National Committee Women’s Division, and in this position, she worked with ER and other key Democratic women to ensure that women were well represented in the New Deal workforce.⁴⁰ The two were a formidable team, with Dewson publicly organizing and advocating for women and ER working behind the scenes to garner the support of men in power. “The nicest thing about politics,” ER once wrote to Dewson, “is lunching with you on Mondays.”⁴¹

Dewson came to party politics through her work in social reform, having previously worked on labor standards, minimum wage laws, and juvenile delinquency. It was actually through her position at the Massachusetts State Industrial School for Girls that she met her life partner Polly Porter (1884–1972) in 1909. Dewson was then director of the parole board and living with her mother, and Porter, 10 years her junior, was working an internship as part of her studies at the Massachusetts School for Social Work. The two became a couple and moved in together in 1912, after the death of Dewson’s mother. They continued to share their lives until Dewson’s death in 1962.⁴²

Unlike the female partnerships discussed above, where both women had careers, Dewson and Porter’s relationship fit a more traditional heterosexual model. Dewson worked outside the home, while Porter (who had a sizable inheritance) tended to their household. The couple shared a bedroom at both their Greenwich Village apartment

³⁸ Susan Ware, *Partner and I: Molly Dewson, Feminism, and New Deal Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 142–47, quotation from xi; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 132–34.

³⁹ Ware, *Partner and I*, 153.

⁴⁰ Ware, *Partner and I*, 160–62, 175–95.

⁴¹ Ware, *Partner and I*, 162.

⁴² Ware, *Partner and I*, 48–61.

(where they lived in the same building as Cook and Dickerman) and their summer home in Maine. They referred to each other as partners and to themselves together as the “Porter-Dewsons.”⁴³



Molly Dewson, circa 1934.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, NPx 55-396.

⁴³ Ware, *Partner and I*, 48–61.

Frances Perkins and Mary Harriman Rumsey

As discussed above, Mary Harriman and ER worked together in the Junior League when they were both young debutantes. Like ER, Harriman was born into wealth but was also drawn to progressive politics and social welfare. She married Charles Cary Rumsey in 1910, and they had three children together before he died in a car accident in 1922.⁴⁴

Frances Perkins met ER in 1911, when Perkins was campaigning for labor safety standards and FDR was a New York state senator. While the two women always had a cordial relationship, their friendship did not develop until ER became more politically active. Perkins was appointed FDR's Secretary of Labor when he became president in 1932, making her the first woman in US history to hold a cabinet-level position. She was married to Paul Wilson for nearly 40 years, until his death in 1952, and they had a daughter, but Perkins never changed her name to Wilson. In fact, she went to court to retain her right to use her own surname. Wilson and Perkins mostly lived separately; Wilson suffered from depression and bipolar disorder and was often hospitalized for these conditions. He remained in New York during Perkins's time in Washington.⁴⁵

While Secretary of Labor, Perkins lived with Mary Harriman Rumsey, who had also moved from New York to DC around the time of FDR's election. Rumsey, well-connected and wealthy, took on many of the duties of the traditional political wife for Perkins, attending functions with her and serving as hostess when the pair entertained. Rumsey also served as a mother figure for Perkins's daughter Susanna, who described Rumsey as a "second mother" to her.⁴⁶

Perkins and Rumsey had known each other for a number of years before moving in together, and only shared a home for two years before Rumsey was killed in a horse-riding accident in 1934. Few letters between Perkins and Rumsey survive, but those that do lack the endearments typical of female couples in this era. Most likely, the two were not romantically involved and instead were close, platonic friends. Living together was likely beneficial for both of them. Rumsey was significantly more affluent than Perkins; both were raising children. Rumsey helped Perkins with the niceties of DC society, and Perkins provided Rumsey with social access to political insiders.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 469–70.

⁴⁵ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, 400–402; Kirstin Downey, *The Woman behind the New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2009), xii; Charles H. Trout, "Perkins, Frances," in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁴⁶ Downey, *The Woman behind the New Deal*, 160–71.

⁴⁷ Downey, *The Woman behind the New Deal*, 160–71.

Still, it is significant that this living arrangement—and the pair functioning socially as a couple—was so widely accepted. Perkins was breaking new ground as the highest-ranking female government official and being in a relationship that seems socially to have functioned as a political marriage may have been easier for Perkins's colleagues (and the press) to accept than a political leader without a “wife.”



Frances Perkins, US Secretary of Labor, 1938.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-hec-25045.

Female Partnerships in Context

Romantic Friendships

Intense romantic relationships between women are surprisingly common throughout European and US history, and they reigned particularly strongly among white middle-class women in the United States in the 19th century. These relationships, known as romantic friendships, coexisted with heterosexual marriage, although there is also a record of heart-break and jealousy following one member of a romantic friendship deciding to marry. The friendships were quite common among white women of the middle class, but they also existed, with less intensity, between men. Evidence of at least one romantic friendship between African American women exists as well. These relationships may have existed throughout society, including other races and classes, but evidence is lacking. Given the low rate of literacy and leisure time among African Americans and working-class whites in the 19th century, written records of such relationships—if they existed—have not survived.⁴⁸

Romantic friendships were at their height in the mid-19th century, when the ideology of separate gender spheres prevailed. Under that ideology, women were not driven by sexual desire and engaged in sexual activity primarily out of marital duty or in the hopes of having a child. Amid such beliefs, passionate relationships with women were widely accepted and not thought of as sexual in any way. Romantic friends themselves may not have considered these relationships sexual even when they involved behavior that is classified as sexual in our own era. If sex, by definition, involved a penis, and women, by definition, did not feel sexual desire, women could do a lot of things together that would not have met the 19th-century definition of sexual.

Even amid changing understandings of gender and female sexuality that took place in the late 19th century, romantic friendships survived in cultural memory. Likewise, older views of gender coexisted with newer ones. Well into the 20th century, many people in the US didn't quite believe two women could be sexual with each other. This cultural framework

⁴⁸ Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 36–39; Leila J. Rupp, “Romantic Friendships,” in *Modern American Queer History*, ed. Allida Mae Black (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 13–23; Dasa Francikova, “Romantic Friendship: Exploring Modern Categories of Sexuality, Love, and Desire between Women,” in *Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History*, ed. Leila J. Rupp and Susan K. Freeman (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 143–52; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1–29; Anthony Rotundo, “Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800–1900,” *Journal of Social History* 23 (fall 1989): 1–26; Karen V. Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Gender & History* 7, no. 2 (August 1, 1995): 153–82.

gave a context for the female partnerships of the Progressive era and beyond. These assumptions provided a counterpoint to emerging ideas about homosexuality—which tended to emphasize depravity, vice, and men.

Who Better to Understand a New Woman?

The women of ER's generation were living in unprecedented times. As a group, they were more educated and more professionally engaged than any generation of US women before them. Through the settlement house movement, social welfare reform, and the fight for women's suffrage, they were changing the world. And much of this work took place in all-female environments. Women's schools and clubs created a place for women to learn new skills and develop new ideas free of male dominance. Although these women were looked at askance by the larger culture for violating so many gender norms, within these communities, they found other women who shared their hopes and their values. In the words of historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Conscious of being scrutinized by a dubious world, they reached out to one another, forming the intense bonds of a shared identity that characterize the liminal experience."⁴⁹

Considered in this context, it is hardly surprising that amid this shared vision and the intensity of working to achieve it, some women fell in love with each other. Feminists like Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read could join together to pursue their lives' work, rather than needing to explain the excitement of these experiences to a male outsider. Their home life could reflect the ideals of the movements they worked for—most obviously, the end of female docility and deference to men. In this, the turn-of-the-20th-century feminists were not so different from many feminists in the 1970s who also made the decision to dedicate their lives to other women.⁵⁰ To again quote Smith-Rosenberg,

Significantly, while rejecting the patriarchal family and their mothers' domestic lives, the first generation of New Women did not repudiate the traditional world of female love or the concept of the female family. It was the male-dominated, not the female-guided, family that restricted women's full development, they insisted. Educated women could develop alternative, single-sex familial institutions which would foster women's autonomy and creative productivity.

⁴⁹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1985), quotation from 252.

⁵⁰ Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936"; Estelle B. Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930," in *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics: Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 21–35.

In radical new environments, on the brink of developing a host of new roles for women, the first generation of New Women wove the traditional ways of their mothers into the heart of their brave new world.⁵¹

Rejecting Heterosexual Marriage

Not unrelated to the choice to dedicate oneself to other women is the fact that many women in this era could not imagine heterosexual marriage as compatible with their career goals. It was customary at this time for women to leave paid employment when they married. Of course, this ideal was simply not possible for many women, and upward of 40 percent of African American women continued paid employment after marriage. Nevertheless, the vast majority of white women and a smaller majority of African American women did stop work. Even for those married women who continued working, the cultural standard was to not work, thus opening working women up to criticism and judgment.⁵²

The cultural imperative for married women to remain at home was even more amplified for mothers of young children. Birth control was becoming more reliable in this era, but it was still illegal in most states. Declining birth rates indicate that Americans were more actively controlling the number of children they had, but it was not a failsafe process. Furthermore, couples were still expected to have some children, if fewer than in previous eras. There was virtually no cultural dialogue about consciously choosing to remain childless. Thus women contemplating marriage could safely assume that it would interfere, to a greater or lesser extent, with their ability to continue their work in the world.⁵³

The Realities of Single Womanhood

Part of the excitement of the Progressive Era was that it marked the first time in US history when there were a substantial number of middle-class jobs available to women. Before this development, financial dependence on men was the normal means of survival for American women. A few were independently wealthy. A few simply did not have anyone to rely on—and by and large, these women faced a choice between dire poverty or sex work. Before the 1860s, many were enslaved. But the vast majority of women relied on a male relative to support them. Usually, it was a husband, but if a woman failed to marry, she would then need to depend on the kindness of relatives to provide her shelter, food, and whatever else she required.

⁵¹ Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936,” 254–55.

⁵² Martha H. Patterson, ed., *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894–1930* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 8.

⁵³ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 174–75.

The late 19th century opened up employment opportunities for women at all skill levels, and women's opportunities for professional work expanded still further in the early 20th century. Employment was a crucial factor in allowing women who loved each other to avoid marriage to men and the control of their behavior by relatives who supported them. Professional employment expanded some women's options still further, allowing them to pursue fulfilling careers. Nevertheless, women's wages remained significantly lower than men's. Even a woman in a professional position might have difficulty maintaining a middle-class lifestyle on her wages alone, as Frances Perkins found after her husband was no longer able to work but before she partnered with Rumsey. Thus, for women who chose to pursue a career instead of marriage, entering into a domestic partnership with another woman could enable them to live at a higher standard of living than they would have been able to on their own.

Female partnerships also provided safety for unmarried women. In this era, unaccompanied women were assumed to be sexually available. Because of this, women had difficulty being truly independent even when they were earning their own wages. Rooming houses and social service organizations—such as the Anthony Home for Working Women in New York City, founded by the Roosevelts' Hyde Park neighbor, Louise Vanderbilt—provided places for single working-class women to live and socialize. Single middle-class women usually lived with their families of origin. But if a woman wanted to live independently, away from constant oversight, it was far more acceptable for her to have a live-in female companion than for her to live by herself. Likewise, travel was much easier and safer for women if they were accompanied. Thus it is possible that some women became companions to each other in order to pursue the life they wanted without being subject to ongoing suspicion and the danger of harassment.⁵⁴

Ironically, because of this association of unaccompanied women with sexual promiscuity, female couples seem to have been considered more socially acceptable than single women. This might explain why female partnerships prevailed even at a time when “homosexuals” were being vilified and classified as mentally ill. The still-prevalent idea that women were sexually passive, coupled with the need for a companion if one was to maintain sexual propriety, seems to have created a cultural space for women who *were* sexually involved with each other to escape public censure.

⁵⁴ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Same-Sex Desire and Gender Variance in Context

The previous chapter described the medical establishment's invention of homosexuality and placed it within the context of larger anxieties of the Gilded Age. However, scientists were not the only voices to be heard on the subject. Beginning in the late 19th century in New York City and Washington, DC, and spreading to other US urban centers in the early 20th century, men and women who desired their own sex, along with people who did not identify with the gender that society had assigned to them, began to gather in social circles and certain commercial establishments and create underground subcultures where they could socialize and express themselves. Historians George Chauncey and, more recently, author Hugh Ryan have studied New York City's queer subcultures in detail.⁵⁵

Greenwich Village and the Making of an LGBTQ Subculture

In the early 20th century, the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City was known as a haven for free thinkers, artists, and other bohemians. The Village teemed with new ideas; it was the US center of middle-class sexual radicalism, as discussed in the last chapter.⁵⁶ This reputation for unconventionality and sexual experimentation drew a significant number of people who we would today describe as LGBTQ. According to Chauncey, by the 1920s, the Village was the largest gay enclave in the United States, and the first to exist outside of a working-class neighborhood.⁵⁷ A 1925 magazine article claimed the neighborhood had at least 20 businesses “catering to the ‘temperamental’ element.”⁵⁸ And by 1930, homosexual activity was so common that one sociologist went so far as to

⁵⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of a Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Hugh Ryan, *When Brooklyn Was Queer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019); On D.C., see Channing Gerard Joseph, “The First Drag Queen Was a Former Slave,” *The Nation*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/drag-queen-slave-ball>. See also Genny Beemyn, *A Queer Capital: A History of Gay Life in Washington, D.C.* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jennifer Brier and Anne Parsons, “Gender Crossroads: Representations of Gender Transgressions in Chicago's Press, 1850–1920,” in *Out in Chicago: LGBT History at the Crossroads* (Chicago: Chicago History Museum, 2011), 23–40; Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁵⁶ Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 273–79.

⁵⁷ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227–28.

⁵⁸ “Village ‘Joints’ Out or Tame,” *Variety*, May 6, 1925, 19, quoted in Chauncey, 237.

claim that it had become fashionable. She argued that many in the Village were people “for whom sex was merely a symbol and who turned to promiscuity or homosexuality to express the completeness of their defiance.”⁵⁹

Eleanor Roosevelt has exposure to Greenwich Village from at least her late teens. Upon return to New York from boarding school for her coming out season in 1902, ER met Ellen “Bay” Emmet through their mutual friend Bob Ferguson (who would go on to marry Isabella Selmes, later Greenway). Emmet was an artist living in the Village, and through her, ER met a range of professional women and “freethinkers” who attended gatherings at Emmet’s studio.⁶⁰

ER found an even closer circle of friends in the neighborhood beginning in the 1920s. Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read, Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman, and Molly Dewson and Polly Porter all had apartments in the Village. Cook and Dickerman lived across the hall from Dewson and Porter at 121 W. Twelfth Street. Unmarried women living singly or in pairs comprised the majority of the occupants of this building’s 24 apartments. These included Communist Party members Grace Hutchins and Anna Rochester, who were also friends of the Porter-Dewsons.⁶¹

Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read lived three blocks away, at 20 East Eleventh Street, in an apartment building they owned. According to author Jan Jarboe Russell, “The brownstone was built in the prewar style; it was five stories tall and contained nine apartments. The street outside their house was serene, and the mood in their book-lined living room was set by beautiful rugs and objects, and for Eleanor, a feeling of comfort and of being appreciated.” When she was in New York, ER spent several evenings a week at their apartment, and in 1935, she rented her own apartment on the fourth floor of Lape and Read’s building. “Her apartment would be small compared to her other homes, only 1,350 square feet, but it had high ceilings, good light, and a sunporch that overlooked the gardens on the roof.”⁶² It was a place where ER could live independently, free of her husband, mother-in-law, children, and even, perhaps, Cook and Dickerman with whom she shared the cottage at Val-Kill. (Her private cottage there was not completed until the late 1930s.) Yet independence did not mean solitude. In addition to her friends mere blocks away, Lape and Read remained in the same building. And both Earl Miller and Lorena Hickok spent time with ER at this apartment and stayed overnight.⁶³

⁵⁹ Caroline F. Ware, *Greenwich Village, 1920–1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post-War Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 240.

⁶⁰ Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 38–39.

⁶¹ Ware, *Partner and I*, 134; Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 121. Ware details other unmarried female associates of the Porter-Dewsons in the Village and elsewhere on p. 38.

⁶² Susan Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick: The Love Affair That Shaped a First Lady*, 2017, 73, 158–59; Quotations from Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 81–82.

⁶³ Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 131; Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick*, 161.

ER even brought her husband into the neighborhood's orbit. When Sara Roosevelt died in 1941, FDR and ER opted to sell the adjoining Manhattan townhouses the family had lived in since 1908. In 1942, ER also gave up the Eleventh Street apartment, and the couple signed a four-year lease on an apartment at 29 Washington Square West, overlooking Greenwich Village. This apartment was a seven-room penthouse in the same building where ER's secretary Malvina Thompson lived. FDR and ER planned to make this their primary residence in New York City after FDR's presidency, but his 1945 death while still in office altered these plans. ER instead chose to make Val-Kill her primary residence in retirement, although she did use the Washington Square apartment as her home base in Manhattan until 1949. She told Hick she would always have a room in this apartment, and ER's friend Joseph Lash also had a key.⁶⁴

ER's long-standing presence in the Village indicates that she was familiar with sex radicalism, with polyamorous relationships, and with LGBTQ subcultures. She was thus well aware that a sexual relationship with Lorena Hickok was an option, and it is also likely she understood that her later friend Pauli Murray was ambivalent about her gender and/or sexually attracted to women.

Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok

ER's relationship with writer Lorena Hickok, known as Hick, differed in many ways from the female partnerships described above. The couple's love affair took place within a complex web of other relationships. These included ER's marriage with FDR, her domestic relationship with Cook and Dickerman, her affinity with Earl Miller, and, later, her intense friendships with Joseph Lash and David Gurewitsch. In addition, ER and Hick were never able to set up house together and live as a couple. Although the pair lived together at various points in their relationship, these arrangements involved Hick moving into a house ER had already established, and in all these situations, they lived with other people as well. Nevertheless, theirs was one of the most significant relationships in ER's life (and by far the most important relationship in Hick's life), and so it warrants particular consideration.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 166; Shannon B. Butler, *Roosevelt Homes of the Hudson Valley: Hyde Park and Beyond* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2020), chs. 4–5; Joseph P. Lash and Eleanor Roosevelt, *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 355.

⁶⁵ The most detailed recounting of their relationship can be found in Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick*. For each woman's role in the New Deal, see Michael Golay, *America 1933: The Great Depression, Lorena Hickok, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Shaping of the New Deal* (New York: Free Press, 2013); Correspondence between the two has been compiled in Eleanor Roosevelt, Lorena A. Hickok, and Rodger Streitmatter, *Empty without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000).



Lorena Hickok, 1940.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, JAR 79-76-56.

Lorena Hickock was born on March 7, 1893, in East Troy, Wisconsin. Her mother's family were fairly well-off farmers, and her father was a butter maker at the time of her birth, although throughout Hick's childhood, he was often unemployed, forcing the family to move frequently throughout the Midwest. Addison Hickok was cruel and abusive toward his family, and things only got worse after Hick's mother, Anna Hickok, died of a stroke when Hick was 13. Her father, who had been physically abusive to Hick throughout her childhood, began sexually abusing her as well. Hick fled at age 14 and worked a few menial jobs until a cousin of her mother's agreed to care for her. She moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, to be with this relative, and was able to finish high school.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Golay, *America 1933*, 22–25; Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 278.

Hick attended Lawrence College for a year, then dropped out and got her first newspaper job at the *Battle Creek Journal*. Within a year, she moved on to the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, where she served as society editor.⁶⁷ Through that job, she met opera singer Ernestine Schumann-Heink, and the pair became quite close. ER biographer Blanche Wiesen Cook suggests that the friends may also have had a romantic or sexual relationship, referring to reports that Schumann-Heink had “a colourful private life” and the fact that she gave Hick a sapphire ring surrounded by diamond chips. Hick would later give this ring to ER.⁶⁸

In 1917, at the age of 23, Hick moved again, this time to Minneapolis and its newspaper, the *Tribune*. She stayed there for nearly a decade, during which time she became partnered with Ella Morse, a wealthy woman two years Hick's senior, who worked part-time at the *Tribune's* society page. Hick later credited her time in Minneapolis with truly teaching her the newspaper business, and in 1923, she won the Associated Press's award for best feature article of the month, a national honor. The work was relentless, however, and by her early 30s, Hick had been diagnosed with diabetes. At Morse's urging, she took a leave from work in 1926, and the couple moved to San Francisco for Hick to rest and regain her health.⁶⁹

Things did not go as planned, however, and in San Francisco, Morse ended up leaving Hick to marry a childhood friend named Roy Dickinson. Heartbroken, Hick decided not to return to Minneapolis and instead got a job at the *New York Mirror*. She was not there long before she landed a position with the Associated Press (AP) New York Bureau in 1928. This same year, Franklin Roosevelt was elected governor of New York, an amazing political comeback for a man who had been ravaged by polio a mere seven years earlier.⁷⁰

FDR's election brought ER into the role of first lady of New York, and it was in this capacity that ER and Hick first encountered each other.⁷¹ However, the pair did not become close until FDR's 1932 run for the presidency. ER accompanied FDR on the campaign trail, and Hick was assigned to cover her. The two developed a passionate intimacy with each other, which “became the pivot of [Hick's] existence.”⁷² After FDR was elected and the Roosevelts moved into the White House, ER and Hick exchanged constant letters filled with endearments and expressions of longing, as well as accounts of each other's days and discussions of a range of issues. They saw each other as frequently as they could, and Hick accompanied ER on multiple trips, both official and private.⁷³

⁶⁷ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 278; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 484–86.

⁶⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 486.

⁶⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 486–88.

⁷⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 487–88; Golay, *America 1933*, 25–26.

⁷¹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 270.

⁷² Jean Christie, “Hickok, Lorena,” in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁷³ Christie, “Hickok, Lorena.”

Shortly after she moved into the White House in 1933, ER wrote Hick, "My pictures are nearly all up & I have you in my sitting room where I can look at you most of my waking hours! I can't kiss you [in person] so I kiss your *picture* good night and good morning! . . . One more day marked off [until they could see each other again] my dear. My dear if you meet me [in public] may I forget there are other reporters present or must I behave? I shall want to hug you to death. I can hardly wait! A world of love to you & good night & God bless you 'light of my life.'"⁷⁴

In December 1933, Hick wrote to ER, "Dear: Tonight it's Bemidji, away up in the timber country, not a bad hotel, and one day nearer you. Only eight more days. Twenty-four hours from now it will be only seven more—just a week! I've been trying today to bring back your face. . . . Most clearly I remember your eyes with a kind of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just northeast of the corner of your mouth against my lips. I wonder what we'll do when we meet—what we'll say."⁷⁵ And the following month, ER wrote to Hick, "Gee! What wouldn't I give to talk to you & hear you now, oh, dear one, it is all the little things, tones in your voice, the feel of your hair, gestures, these are the things I think about & long for."⁷⁶ Such remarks are everywhere in the couple's correspondence during the early years of their relationship.

In the words of historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "There is every evidence that Hick's love for Eleanor came at a critical moment in Eleanor's life, providing a mix of tenderness, loyalty, confidence, and courage that sustained her in her struggle to redefine her sense of self and her position in the world. For Eleanor, Hick's love was a positive force, allowing her to grow and take wing, write the story of her life the way *she* wanted it to be, even in the White House."⁷⁷

In June 1933, Hick left her job with the AP, one of the most difficult decisions of her life. Although she loved her work as a journalist, her relationship with ER ran the risk of calling her objectivity into question. ER helped her secure a new job in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). There, she would travel the country, observing the impact the Great Depression was having on the country's residents and reporting those observations to FERA director Harry Hopkins.⁷⁸

Numerous historians, including Susan Quinn, Cook, and Goodwin, have noted how difficult it was for Hick to give up her career in journalism. It had been key to her identity and provided her life purpose. And although she believed she was doing important

⁷⁴ ER to Hick, March 9, 1933, Roosevelt, Hickok, and Streitmatter, *Empty without You*, 21–23.

⁷⁵ Hick to ER, December 5, 1933, Roosevelt, Hickok, and Streitmatter, 52.

⁷⁶ ER to Hick, January 27, 1934, Roosevelt, Hickok, and Streitmatter, 77.

⁷⁷ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 222.

⁷⁸ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 235–36; Golay, *America 1933*, 38–39.

work for FERA, the fact that she had given up her chosen career shifted the balance of interdependence in her relationship with ER. Hick began demanding more of ER's time and attention than ER, as first lady during a national crisis, had the ability to give. Hick was not even ER's only love. The first lady continued her romantic relationship with Earl Miller and remained married to FDR. In later years, ER would develop new bonds, most notably with David Gurewitsch after FDR's death.⁷⁹

During FDR's first two terms as president, ER's apartment in Greenwich Village was the place where Hick and she could spend the most time alone together. Hick maintained a separate residence, too. She remained with FERA until 1936, then took a publicity position with the New York World's Fair, held in 1939. Hick then joined the Democratic National Committee (DNC) working first in publicity, then, in 1941, becoming the executive secretary of the DNC Women's Division.⁸⁰ This last position took her to Washington, DC. She moved into the White House, where she and ER could see each other almost daily, staying in a bedroom across the hallway from ER's, the room that had been occupied by Louis Howe when he lived in the White House.⁸¹

As time went on, Hick's diabetes grew progressively worse, and by 1945, it forced her to resign from the Women's Division. She never again was able to work full-time. She mostly earned money writing nonfiction, but lack of income was a perpetual struggle for her in the last decades of her life. In the mid-1950s, she once again moved to be close to ER. She stayed for a time at Val-Kill, then moved to an apartment just down the road in the village of Hyde Park. She remained there until her death in 1968 at the age of 75.⁸²

Pauli Murray

Pauli Murray entered ER's life in the late 1930s. As a gender-ambivalent African American lawyer and civil rights activist, Murray provided ER with a unique perspective on the issues facing the United States in the mid-20th century. Their friendship was unusual and noteworthy enough to warrant a book-length investigation, Patricia Bell-Scott's 2016 monograph *The Firebrand and the First Lady*.⁸³ In Bell-Scott's words, "Murray . . . was of a younger generation, determined to challenge authority and inequality head-on. . . . Because she did not speak for an established group [like Mary McLeod Bethune and Walter White

⁷⁹ Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick*, 81–84; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933–1938* (New York: Viking, 1999), 116–17; Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 221–25.

⁸⁰ Christie, "Hickok, Lorena."

⁸¹ Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time*, 219.

⁸² Christie, "Hickok, Lorena."

⁸³ Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

did], Murray could not deliver votes—nor did she want to. What she offered instead was the honest and often brash opinion of an independent thinker who could not be still in the face of injustice.”⁸⁴

Pauli Murray (1910–85) was born in Baltimore and spent most of her childhood in Durham, North Carolina, with her maternal grandparents after her mother died when Murray was three years old. Murray was raised female and publicly presented herself as a woman—albeit a not-particularly-feminine woman—throughout her lifetime. ER, too, understood Murray to be a woman, and so I have included their relationship in this chapter on ER's female circle and opted to use female pronouns when discussing Murray. However, privately, Murray expressed ambivalence about being classified as female. Although given the name Anna Pauline at birth, Murray chose to go by the more gender-neutral name of Pauli. She described herself in private writings as a “he/she personality” and sought (without success) testosterone injections and hormone therapy from the medical establishment.⁸⁵

The sides of her identity that she was most open about with ER, however, were as an African American, a feminist, and a member of a younger generation (Murray was born the same year as ER's son Elliott).

* * *

Female peer groups were essential to ER's growth and happiness. Both at Allenswood as an adolescent and during her political apprenticeship at midlife, women supported her and mentored her. In turn, she supported and mentored other women, through her work in the Women's Division of the New York Democratic Committee and, later, as first lady. She entered politics at a critical moment in US history, as women were redefining their role in party politics, postsuffrage. It was in politics that ER found her calling, and she became a leading voice advocating for women playing a role in public life. In these activities, she was joined by a cohort of female friends and colleagues who worked together to create a place for women in politics and government.

⁸⁴ Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, xiv.

⁸⁵ Susan Ware and Stacy Lorraine Braukman, eds., “Murray, Anna Pauline Pauli,” in *Notable American Women: Completing the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Pauli Murray Center, “Pronouns, Gender, and Pauli Murray,” Pauli Murray, n.d., <https://www.paulimurraycenter.com/pronouns-pauli-murray>; Simon D. Elin Fisher, “Pauli Murray's Peter Panic: Perspectives from the Margins of Gender and Race in Jim Crow America,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (May 1, 2016): 95–103, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334259>.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eleanor Roosevelt's Public Image

Eleanor Roosevelt had a stunning impact on the course of the 20th century, one that lasted well beyond her life span. Her many contributions to the world make her well worth remembering. However, ER inspires something beyond remembering; she remains well-loved, even 60 years after her death. I would argue that she garners such affection (in addition to respect) because of three elements of her life story that make her particularly inspiring. First, her vast accomplishments are all the more impressive because nearly all of them were accomplished in middle or old age. The first half of her life was, in fact, rather unremarkable. Second, in addition to the monumental transformation from traditional housewife to elder stateswoman, ER continued to grow and expand her thinking on issues throughout the public phase of her life. She did not apologize for being a work in progress. Third, her trademark humility and interest in people regardless of their background or credentials made her relatable in a way that many celebrities and politicians are not.

While these elements were truly part of who she was, they were also characteristics that were emphasized in the public image she crafted for herself. As a child of the upper class, the niece of a US president, and a politician's wife, ER was, as one of her biographers put it, "acutely aware of her public image." And she was a master at that image, one that evolved to fit her changing needs while always harkening back to a traditional view of womanhood. In this, ER revealed herself as a skilled politician and an expert in the use of soft power.¹ This chapter considers ER's public image and the ways it changed over the course of her lifetime.

¹ Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

Relying on Traditional Models of Womanhood, 1905–World War I

During the first half of her marriage, Eleanor Roosevelt consciously strove to be a traditional wife and mother. As she described it, once she was married “for the next 10 years it never occurred to me to do anything outside my own home.”² Although, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, roles for women and ideas about marriage were changing dramatically during the first 40 years of her life, ER was slow to adapt to these changes. In addition to her personal preferences, she had the public’s expectations to consider, and although circumstances were generally changing, expectations for political wives and wealthy women still tended toward the conservative.

Although intelligent and energetic by nature, ER described her early marriage as a period of passivity: “I was beginning to be an entirely dependent person—no tickets to buy, no plans to make, someone always to decide everything for me. A pleasant contrast to my former life, and I slipped into it with the greatest of ease. . . . As young women go, I suppose I was fitting pretty well into the pattern of a conventional, quiet young society matron.”³

In an effort to keep the peace within her new family, she let her mother-in-law dictate the parameters of her life; Sara determined where the family would live, how ER’s children would be raised, and offered vocal opinions about the couple’s associates. ER allowed her mother-in-law to cloud her own thinking. Biographer Blanche Weisen Cook notes that ER’s letters from this period are “full of observations intended to please Sara, who loathed politics and political people, especially political women.”⁴

Looking back on the first decade of her marriage from later in life, ER emphasized her naivete. Her autobiography is littered with references to her innocence about the workings of the world: “I had never realized . . .”; “Little idiot that I was . . .”; “It never occurred to me. . . .”⁵ She portrayed herself as hopelessly ill-prepared for adulthood, deferring to her mother-in-law and her husband on all major decisions. In embracing innocence, passivity, and deference, ER was acting out dominant ideals of womanhood from the mid-19th century. They were out of step for her own generation, as discussed in Chapter 1, but probably the natural consequence of being reared by her grandmother (born in 1843) and being so influenced by her mother-in-law (born in 1854). As a young bride of an ambitious Harvard man, she may well have been aware that these were also the

² Lorena Hickok, “War Started Mrs. Roosevelt on Her Career in Public Life,” *Boston Globe*, November 11, 1932.

³ Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 55.

⁴ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1993* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 175–86, quotation 177.

⁵ Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 55, 56, 63.

gender ideals of those who held power over her husband's future.⁶ In later life, she may have emphasized her early disinterest in affecting the wider world as a way of inspiring others to engage with social issues, even if they didn't feel they possessed the expertise and education to do so.



ER and FDR with their first two children, Anna and James, 1908.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 4796882.

⁶ For more on the attitudes of the wealth elite, see Milton Rugoff, *America's Gilded Age: Intimate Portraits from an Era of Extravagance and Change, 1850–1890* (New York: Holt, 1989); Alexis Gregory, *Families of Fortune: Life in the Gilded Age* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 9–21; Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 3–13.

Although a common narrative during ER's lifetime held that she embraced a more public persona in response to FDR's need for her to be his "eyes and ears" after he was paralyzed by polio in 1921, the process of becoming more self-sufficient occurred more gradually and began a decade earlier, with FDR's entry into politics. In Cook's words, "The year 1910 changed everything."⁷

Cook's statement pertains primarily to FDR's entry into politics. He conducted his first political campaign that year and was elected to the New York State Senate in November. For ER, 1910 marked her greatest struggle with depression as she mourned the loss of her infant son Franklin Jr. (the first), who died on November 1, 1909; prepared for the birth of her son Elliott, who was born less than a year later, on September 23, 1910; and began to face the temperamental differences between herself and her husband.⁸

Although the couple shared a desire to help people, an interest in the world, and eventually, a love of politics, FDR and ER actually had quite distinct personalities. ER was reflective, while her husband was light and breezy; ER was a person of deep convictions, while people found it maddeningly difficult to figure out what FDR thought about an issue. In the words of historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, "Over the years, the very qualities that had first attracted Franklin and Eleanor to one another had become sources of conflict in their marriage. After initially valuing Franklin for his confidence, charm, and sociability, qualities that stood in contrast to her own insecurity and shyness, Eleanor had come to see these traits as shallow and duplicitous. After being drawn to Eleanor's sincerity, honesty, and high principles, Franklin had redefined these same attributes as stiffness and inflexibility."⁹

FDR's election to the New York Senate precipitated a change of scenery and duties for both Eleanor and Franklin. The family moved to Albany and established their first household separate from FDR's mother Sara. The newfound autonomy, along with her new duties as political spouse, helped alleviate ER's depression and started her on the road to becoming the independent, outspoken woman of legend. In Albany, she entertained important people, kept up a round of social calls to other politicians' wives, educated herself on the issues of the day, and used that education to offer counsel to FDR. Publicly, she explained these changes as motivated by a desire to be supportive of her husband's career. "It was a wife's duty to be interested in whatever interested her husband, whether it was politics, books or a particular dish for dinner." No doubt these actions were undertaken, at least in part, to support FDR, but they also engaged ER's sharp mind and fulfilled

⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 186.

⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 183–86.

⁹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 373; see also David Michaelis, *Eleanor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 145–48.

her desire for a sense of purpose. It is true that she was still conforming to others' expectations and playing the role of wifely helpmeet, but she was also, slowly, beginning to develop an independent sense of herself.¹⁰

FDR was elected as a Democrat, but one of his first moves as an elected official was to join a rebellion within his own party, aimed at quelling the power of the Tammany Hall political bosses over state politics. When the insurgents needed a place to convene and strategize away from the state capitol, ER offered the family's new home. This move gave FDR an unusually high profile for a first-term senator and provided ER with firsthand exposure to political dealings and the importance of public relations.¹¹ Yet 20 years later, on the cusp of becoming first lady, ER would frame the political education she received in Albany within traditional feminine terms. "I would sit and listen to [the legislators Franklin brought home] by the hour, fascinated. But it never occurred to me to enter in."¹²

Although the insurgency was ultimately unsuccessful in breaking Tammany Hall's power, it posed a serious opposition and brought FDR to the attention of Democrats at the national level. In 1912, FDR threw his support behind Woodrow Wilson as the Democratic nominee for president, while also running for re-election to the State Senate. He won reelection, but quickly resigned in order to take an appointed position in President Wilson's administration: Assistant Secretary of the US Navy. The family moved to Washington, DC, and ER began a whole new level of learning to be a proper political wife.¹³

In later recalling that first move to Washington, ER recalled the advice she received from her Aunt Bye (Elliott's sister): "As the wife of the assistant secretary of the navy my duty was first, last, and all the time to the Navy itself."¹⁴ She made a grueling round of social calls each week, putting herself before the wives of powerful men, so that her husband's name would get in front of their husbands. She also attended public occasions with her husband. And during the period they lived in Washington (1912–20), she also gave birth to her two youngest sons, in 1914 and 1916. She was certainly busy, but the bulk of her public and private behavior was still in the service of her husband or her children.

Nevertheless, by the outbreak of war in Europe, in ER's words, "I was beginning to acquire considerable independence again because my husband's duties made it impossible for him to travel with us at all times, and I was accustomed to managing quite a small army

¹⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 187–210; Roosevelt, "This Is My Story," *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, quotation 66.

¹¹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 120–23.

¹² Hickok, "War Started Mrs. Roosevelt on Her Career in Public Life."

¹³ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 124–32; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 192–200.

¹⁴ Roosevelt, "This Is My Story," *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 72, irregular capitalization in the original.

on moves from Washington to Hyde Park and to Campobello and back.”¹⁵ Such independence would prove to be a critical element of creating her own public image. However, up until the war, whatever public profile ER had was as a political wife. The US entry into World War I in 1917 marked a turning point in ER's life, and this in turn required changes to her public image.

Chrysalis: 1917–1932

As the wife of the Assistant Secretary of the US Navy, ER played a very public role in the volunteer effort during World War I, but she embraced war work with a fervor that went far beyond what was required to satisfy the public's expectations. Working 15-hour days, she organized the Navy Red Cross with Addie Daniels, the wife of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels; headed up the Navy League Knitting Service; and visited ailing sailors injured in the war. She staffed a soldiers' canteen at DC's Union Station, and even learned to drive so that she could assist with the Red Cross motor corps.¹⁶ Clearly, ER had found a sense of purpose beyond anything she had experienced in the role of wife and mother; in her own words, “I loved it. I simply ate it up. When Franklin went over [to Europe] on the destroyer in 1918, I sent the children [aged 2 to 12] to their grandmother in Hyde Park and spent the Summer in Washington, living alone in the house with one servant and going every day to the canteen.”¹⁷

This intense level of activity—and ER's developing public life—came to an abrupt halt in the fall of 1918. The war ended in November of that year, but even before that, the influenza pandemic had begun. The disease hit the Roosevelt household that fall, after FDR returned from his trip to Europe, where he had caught the potentially deadly disease onboard his return ship. In the aftermath of FDR's return, ER discovered that her husband was having an affair with Lucy Mercer. In a matter of a few short months, ER faced the end of the work that had whole-heartedly occupied her; the potential demise of multiple family members who were ill with flu; and a marital betrayal that challenged her understanding of the man to whom she had dedicated her entire adult life.¹⁸

The period between 1918 and 1920 was difficult for ER and for the country. While Eleanor worked to reconstitute her life, suffrage activists made the final push to ratify the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote. That amendment would be ratified in

¹⁵ Roosevelt, “This is My Story,” 80.

¹⁶ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 215; Emily Herring Wilson, *The Three Graces of Val-Kill: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nancy Cook in the Place They Made Their Own* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 17; Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 151.

¹⁷ Hickok, “War Started Mrs. Roosevelt on Her Career in Public Life.”

¹⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 227–31.

August 1920. The revolution in Russia, coupled with a groundswell of labor activism in the United States, fueled a “Red Scare,” in which the US public was gripped by a near-hysterical fear of communist infiltration. And the country experienced a particularly violent wave of racial unrest. Called “riots” at the time, these racial disturbances were sparked by mob violence perpetuated by European Americans against African Americans. Mass, racially motivated attacks in Chicago, Tulsa, and Washington, DC (where the Roosevelts still lived), added to the general feeling that the United States was on the cusp of a dangerous new age.¹⁹

This was the political climate when, in mid-1920, FDR was unanimously nominated to run as vice president in the Democratic presidential campaign of Ohio Governor James M. Cox. Seizing a role in this campaign might have enabled ER to once again fill her days with purposeful work, but she did not take this opportunity—perhaps because she was still recovering from the trauma of 1918. Publicly, she stated, “I was glad for my husband, but it never occurred to me to be much excited.” Instead, she “felt detached and objective, as though I were looking at someone else’s life.” Apparently, it was not yet the moment for Eleanor Roosevelt to fully embrace her public role as political powerbroker and advocate for the downtrodden. She accompanied FDR on one of his campaign tours of the West, but that was the extent of her involvement.²⁰

She did, however, join the nonpartisan League of Women Voters in 1920 and in 1921 became chair of the league’s New York State Legislative Committee. By that time, Cox had lost his bid for president, and ER’s decision not to ally herself with the Democratic Committee Women’s Division, even while her husband ran as the Democrat nominee for US vice-president, seems to have been a public statement in and of itself.²¹

¹⁹ Erica J. Ryan, *Red War on the Family: Sex, Gender, and Americanism in the First Red Scare* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 17–46; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 237–55.

²⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 217–74, quotations 273; J. M. Fenster, *FDR’s Shadow: Louis Howe, the Force That Shaped Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 119.

²¹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 274–82; Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 314–15.



ER, 1920. Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site.

Louis Howe's Mentorship

Whatever progress ER was making toward determining her next move was derailed in late summer 1921, when FDR contracted polio and for nearly a year, ER's life revolved around both taking care of Franklin's physical needs and keeping him engaged with the wider world so he did not fall into despair.²² In ER's own telling, FDR was incapacitated but still had important work to do in the world, so she, in her long-standing role as helpmeet, ventured outside of her traditional role in order to be his "eyes and ears" and keep his vision for the country moving forward while he recovered.²³

The reality was a bit more complicated. ER had caught a glimpse of the satisfaction of purposeful work during World War I; the thought of spending the rest of her days privately caring for her husband—who had betrayed her only a few years earlier—probably seemed a grim prospect. In addition, Louis Howe, already ER's friend, was instrumental in setting her on a course of high-profile public service. In the months after FDR's illness, Howe moved into the Roosevelt household and dedicated himself to FDR's recovery. He also grew closer to ER during this time and soon realized the combined potential of both Roosevelts.²⁴ In author Julia Fenster's words: "It wasn't easy to fight for identity around [Franklin] Roosevelt, and Howe was determined to give Eleanor the chance he didn't have and didn't want, to stand next to Franklin and not behind him in the public eye."²⁵

Howe became ER's first political mentor. He had in fact began this work during the 1920 campaign, although it seems that at that time, he still viewed her primarily in the role of traditional candidate's wife. During the 1920 campaign tour of the West, Howe kept ER company on the train, where they were both feeling a bit out of place. As ER described it,

In later years I learned that he had always liked me and thought I was worth educating, and for that reason he made an effort on this trip to get to know me. He did it cleverly. He knew that I was bewildered by some of the things expected of me as a candidate's wife. . . . The newspaper fraternity was not so familiar to me as it was to become in later years, and I was a little afraid of it. Largely because of Louis' early interpretation of the standards and ethics of the newspaper business, I came to look with interest and confidence on the writing fraternity.²⁶

In the aftermath of FDR's polio, Howe recognized both ER's potential as a political operative and her need for a larger life purpose. In the early spring of 1922, he urged her to become involved with the New York Democratic Committee's Women's Division. Through

²² Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 1993, 309–14.

²³ Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 120–21; see also Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 157.

²⁴ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 133–57.

²⁵ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 124.

²⁶ Quoted in Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 123.

this involvement, she found a class of peers who enthusiastically embraced her as a compatriot and a friend and who influenced ER's choice to dedicate her life to progressive politics and social change. This work also brought her back into the public spotlight, as she traveled New York state rallying women to join the Democratic cause.²⁷

Howe coached ER on how to be a more confident public speaker, practicing with her for hours on end. Her son James estimated that she gave at least a hundred speeches to Howe alone, so that he could critique her performance and she could become more comfortable with the task.²⁸ With Howe's help, ER learned to speak in a lower register and to avoid nervous tics, such as randomly giggling when she was in front of an audience.²⁹

He counseled her on making friends with the press by making their job easier. In the words of Fenster, "For a person who knew nothing about publicity . . . she would eventually stand equal to two towering experts, her husband and her late uncle Theodore, in the use of media in modeling and maintaining a public persona."³⁰ Most importantly, Howe took a sincere interest in her point of view and helped her channel her views into a consistent public image.

Earl Miller's Mentorship

Earl Miller proved to be another major influence on ER's public persona. Developing a lifelong relationship with ER beginning in the late 1920s, he nurtured her independence, helped her become more comfortable with people from a range of backgrounds, and encouraged her to present her best self to the world.

ER biographer David Michaelis has described Miller as "Eleanor's friend and guide as she declassed herself."³¹ ER had been growing increasingly disillusioned about the various rules and pretensions of the upper class, and after Miller's arrival in her life in the late 1920s, she steadily distanced herself from that world. As ER's bodyguard from 1928 to 1932, Miller accompanied her in her travels throughout New York, as she met FDR's constituents, inspected prisons, and learned about the conditions of average people in her home state. Miller, a solidly working-class man, "helped her to realize the universality of her plain sense of humor and wry, optimistic fatalism."³²

²⁷ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 154–57.

²⁸ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 173.

²⁹ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 173–74.

³⁰ Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 123–24.

³¹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 274.

³² Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 274.

Not coincidentally, like Louis Howe (who had a background in theater), Miller had been a performer. In his youth, he had worked as a circus acrobat, a contortionist, and a stuntman. He brought this background to his friendship with ER, helping her become more at ease in front of reporters and crowds. And he improved her photogeneity by encouraging her to smile more in public. He often goofed around behind the camera operators in order to make ER laugh in front of the cameras. Although he did not continue as her bodyguard after the Roosevelts went to the White House, ER and Miller remained friends until ER's death.³³

A New Kind of First Lady, 1932–1945

By the time, Eleanor Roosevelt became First Lady of the United States in 1933, she had completed the bulk of her political education, though one of her gifts was that she never stopped learning from those around her. Her thinking continued to evolve, and she continually stepped into new situations that demanded that she develop new skills. By 1932, however, she was well-versed in the field of politics and had embraced the idea that women had a vital role to play in the running of the world. As she herself put it in her 1933 book *It's Up to the Women*, “We are going through a great crisis in this country and . . . the women have a big part to play if we are coming through it successfully.”³⁴

As discussed in the previous chapter, she continued to work with a tight-knit team of political women to advance the role of women in government and in doing so, to also ensure that the specific needs of women were included in the government's efforts to improve the lives of its citizens. As first lady, however, she moved into a unique position of power. She had the public's attention, and she was determined to use her role to effect change.³⁵

The Great Depression began with the stock market crash of October/November 1929, and by early 1932, the situation was grim. Twenty percent of the US workforce was unemployed, and by March 1932 the unemployment rate had risen to 25 percent.³⁶ By the summer of 1932, the Dow Jones Industrial Average hit 41.22, 89 percent below its historic peak.³⁷ This was the context in which FDR began his campaign for president.

³³ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 274–77; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 339–43.

³⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt and Jill Lepore, *It's Up to the Women* (New York: Nation Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, 2017), 1.

³⁵ For more information on the topics touched on in this paragraph, see Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

³⁶ Michael Golay, *America 1933: The Great Depression, Lorena Hickok, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Shaping of the New Deal* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 4.

³⁷ Gary Richardson et al., “Stock Market Crash of 1929,” Federal Reserve History, accessed 2022, <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/stock-market-crash-of-1929>.



ER greeting guests at a Democratic rally in New York City, during the 1932 presidential campaign.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 62-348.

ER was ambivalent about FDR's bid for the presidency. Since the late 1910s, she had worked steadily to build her own career and by the early 1930s, she had started Val-Kill Industries, was teaching history and English at the Todhunter School, and following her own agenda of social reform efforts. She was fearful that, if FDR became president, she would be forced to give up all that in order to assume the role of a traditional first lady, serving only as White House hostess and supporter of her husband, with no life or goals beyond that.³⁸ Yet, despite her personal concerns, ER joined her husband on the campaign trail. And it was during this work that she grew close to Lorena Hickok, known as Hick, an Associated Press reporter assigned to the campaign, whom ER had first met, briefly, while serving as first lady of New York.³⁹ Their relationship is covered in Chapter 4, "Eleanor Roosevelt's Female World," but it is worth noting here that Hick served as another important advisor on ER's public image.

Lorena Hickok's Mentorship

Although Hick did not have a performance background like Howe and Miller, she was one of the country's top journalists and was intimately familiar with the types of people and stories that sold newspapers. As she grew close with ER during the 1932 campaign, she used that knowledge first to present the future first lady in the most flattering light and, later, to become something of an informal public relations consultant to ER.⁴⁰

On the 1932 campaign trail, Hick was the only journalist assigned to cover ER, and her articles were primarily used by pro-FDR newspapers to keep the candidate in front of women readers.⁴¹ After FDR won, Hick wrote a series of articles on the nation's incoming first lady, and these pieces in many ways created the framework of ER's public image during the 1930s. In the words of media scholar Maurine Beasley, "Hickok presented Mrs. Roosevelt as a traditional yet commendably independent woman, combining the feminine virtues of modesty, self-effacement and service to others with modern career interests." In effect, Hick laid the groundwork for the US public to accept the new idea of an activist first lady.⁴²

Hick continued her position at the Associated Press (AP) for a few months after the election, but her affection for the first lady interfered with her journalistic objectivity, and she resigned in June 1933. This was a momentous decision for someone who had clawed her way to the upper echelons of her male-dominated profession. In an effort to replace

³⁸ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 268–69; Golay, *America 1933*, 18–19.

³⁹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 270, 278–80.

⁴⁰ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 58; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 234–35.

⁴¹ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media: A Public Quest for Self-Fulfillment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 31–32.

⁴² Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media*, 25–37, quotation 32.

journalism in Hick's life, ER arranged for her to go to work in the newly created Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In this position, she traveled the country reporting on economic circumstances and relief efforts to FERA director Harry Hopkins.⁴³

Leaving the field of journalism, while difficult for Hick, did enable her to more freely advise the first lady on her public image. Even before leaving the AP, Hick suggested to ER that she hold her own press conferences, to which only female journalists were invited. Hick herself, assigned to cover New York, did not attend. Historians often present this move as an effort to give women an advantage in the male-dominated field of political journalism, as it most definitely was. However, it also provided ER with her own regular access to the press, in an environment where she was not in direct competition with her husband.⁴⁴

With the ending of Hick's own career as a journalist, she took an interest in ER's writing. The early years of FDR's presidency provided the platform for ER to find her own voice as a writer. She published six books in five years, 1933–38, in addition to innumerable magazine and newspaper articles.⁴⁵ She wrote a regular column for the *Women's Democratic News* from February 1933 until the newspaper merged with the *Democratic Digest* in December 1935. She wrote a monthly column known as "Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt's Page" in the *Women's Home Companion*, and after a few failed attempts with a syndicated monthly newspaper column, she opted instead for a daily column, published six days a week through United Feature Syndicate. "My Day" debuted on December 31, 1935, and ran until shortly before ER's death in 1962, ultimately totaling more than *three thousand* articles and providing her with an ongoing platform to voice her ideas and advocate for causes she thought important.⁴⁶

In these early forays into writing, ER and Hick discussed ideas, and Hick offered advice to improve ER's message. In the words of author Susan Quinn, "There can be no doubt that Hick made Eleanor, through all their talking and corresponding, a better writer over the years. One need only read the preachy first book she published as First Lady, *It's Up to the Women*, and compare it to the second, *This Is My Story*, to discern Hick's influence."⁴⁷ Correspondence between the two sometimes specifically referenced Hick's coaching, as when ER wrote in 1934, "I am terribly grateful for all the work you did on that article."⁴⁸

⁴³ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 235–36; Golay, *America 1933*, 38–39.

⁴⁴ Susan Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick: The Love Affair That Shaped a First Lady*, 2017, 107–8; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 4.

⁴⁵ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933–1938* (New York: Viking, 1999), 7.

⁴⁶ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 309–10; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media*, 68–72; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 354–55; Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 69.

⁴⁷ Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick*, 110–11.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Media*, 77.



ER speaking to the press at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 63-162.

Speaking through the media was just one aspect of ER's transformation of the role of first lady. She also worked directly within the political system to affect change, and one of her main areas of political advocacy revolved around ensuring that everyone, not just white men, benefitted from FDR's relief programs.

A New Deal for All

In 1932, FDR ran on a platform of providing a “New Deal” for US residents, and these ideas resonated with voters. Roosevelt carried 42 out of 48 states and won the election with 57 percent of the vote.⁴⁹ He would go on to transform the presidency and the role of the federal government in people’s lives, while his wife revolutionized the role of first lady, from simple helpmeet to vital advocate for social causes. In the words of her biographer, “As First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt did things that had never been done before. She upset race traditions, championed a New Deal for women, and on certain issues actually ran a parallel administration. On housing and the creation of model communities, for example, ER made decisions and engineered policy.”⁵⁰

While the president and the first lady did not always agree on policy, they shared a vision of comprehensively helping those hardest hit by the Great Depression. FDR immediately went to work creating programs for the nation’s unemployed, and the work his administration accomplished in its first hundred days was astounding. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation were just a few of the programs created within that initial period of the Roosevelt presidency.⁵¹

All told, the New Deal created a social safety net far beyond what this country had ever before provided. And many of its protections—minimum wage and maximum hours for workers, social security payments, FDIC guarantees on money held in banks, and the right of labor to organize—continue into the 21st century.⁵² Writing in 2021, historian Eric Rauchway stated: “The New Deal matters because we all live in it; it gives structure to our lives in ways we do not ordinarily bother to count or catalog. When we imagine the end of the world as we know it, the world we are thinking might end is the one the New Deal built.”⁵³

ER chose to focus her initial efforts on ensuring that women, as well as men, benefited from the New Deal. She worked with Harry Hopkins, director of the new Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), to ensure that at least one of the FERA relief camps was aimed at women.⁵⁴ The first such women’s camp, Camp Tera, opened within

⁴⁹ Golay, *America 1933*, 19.

⁵⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 3.

⁵¹ Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 147–60.

⁵² Eric Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 1–10; *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History. Episode 5: The Rising Road (1933–1939)* (Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2013).

⁵³ Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters*, 7.

⁵⁴ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 297–98.

FDR's first hundred days, on June 10, 1933, in New York state. A young Pauli Murray was one of the women who was aided by Camp Terra; she would go on to become an ardent labor and civil rights activist and lawyer. Murray would also develop a close personal friendship with ER, beginning in 1938.⁵⁵

In November 1933, the first lady hosted a White House Conference on the Emergency Needs of Women, attended by 50 women representing a variety of clubs, organizations, and social service agencies. The result of these efforts, according to ER biographer David Michaelis, was "that for the next five years of women's work relief, ER served as White House go-between, as advisor and sponsor and critic, but above all as friend to jobless women."⁵⁶

ER was also a friend to the nation's African Americans. She advocated for racially integrated relief programs and the resistance she met while advocating for this idea inspired her to educate herself; in January 1934, she hosted a group of African American leaders for dinner at the White House to discuss racial issues. By the end of the evening, she had pledged her support in the fight for racial equality and told those in attendance that they should contact her when her assistance was needed.⁵⁷ Beginning with this dinner, ER regularly hosted African Americans at the White House, quietly signaling to the country that the White House was now integrated.⁵⁸

NAACP executive secretary Walter White, who had attended that first dinner, soon had cause to take ER up on her offer of assistance. White was the primary architect of the Costigan-Wagner Act, which would have made lynching a federal crime. After the bill was introduced to Congress in January 1933, White sought ER's assistance in championing the cause. ER agreed, publicly advocating for the bill and arranging a meeting between White and FDR, after the president's secretaries had refused to put the civil rights activist on the president's schedule. FDR refused to publicly endorse the bill, fearing retribution from the Southern Democrats, and the bill ultimately failed, without having come to a vote. Nevertheless, ER continued to speak out against racial violence and inequality for the rest of her life.⁵⁹

One of the longest-lasting programs to come out of the New Deal was a series of social protections guaranteed by the Social Security Act of 1935. This act, signed into law in August, provided aid to households that had lost their breadwinner, support to the elderly,

⁵⁵ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 352–54; Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 4, for more on Camp Tera, see Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, 3–18.

⁵⁶ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 298.

⁵⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 153–54.

⁵⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 161.

⁵⁹ *Roosevelts, The Rising Road*; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 29–30.

workers' compensation, and unemployment insurance. These programs, along with universal health care and "work security" (that is, guaranteed employment through public works projects to all those willing to work) had been the dream of progressive social reformers for decades. Supporters included Jane Addams and Lillian Wald of the settlement house movement, labor advocate Florence Kelley, FERA director Harry Hopkins, US Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who had been working for such protections since 1924.⁶⁰

ER played an instrumental role in both the Social Security Act and the creation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), established by executive order in May 1935. Originally conceived of as part of the Social Security Act, the WPA provided work security through public works projects that included the construction of 29,000 bridges and 150 airfields, building more than 4,000 schools and 130 hospitals, the paving or repair of 280,000 miles of roads, and a massive tree planting effort to secure topsoil during the Dust Bowl. Universal health care was not included in these efforts, due to FDR's lack of support for the issue after the American Medical Association opposed it.⁶¹

Harry Hopkins, already head of the FERA (which the WPA was intended to replace), was appointed head of the WPA. He was an ally of ER, and together they worked to ensure that women, African Americans, and youth had access to WPA programs. They were aided in this mission by Ellen Woodward, who had served as head of the women's division of FERA and assumed the same role at the WPA. Together ER and Woodward fought for women's job programs whenever it seemed that supporters and administrators were defaulting to the assumption that it was men who most needed jobs. ER's interest in youth came to fruition when the National Youth Administration (NYA) was created in 1935 as a program of the WPA, and her goals were further served when her friend Mary McLeod Bethune was hired to oversee the NYA division of negro affairs.⁶²

⁶⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 233–35, 247.

⁶¹ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 583–85; History.com editors, "Works Progress Administration (WPA)," History, July 13, 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/works-progress-administration>; Anya Jabour, "It's Up to the Women," Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, n.d., <https://www.nps.gov/elro/learn/historyculture/it-s-up-to-the-women.htm>.

⁶² Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 47–52, 582–85; Jabour, "It's Up to the Women."



Undated portrait of Harry Hopkins, by Harris & Ewing Photography.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-hec-21642.

ER was less successful in accomplishing her vision for the Social Security Act; compromises were necessary for the bill to pass Congress. ER and her allies had envisioned universal protection, but the final version excluded several categories of workers, and these were categories in which African Americans and women were disproportionately represented. The result was that 80 percent of African American women, 60 percent of African American men, and 60 percent of white women were excluded from protection. In the words of Blanche Cook, “After months of debate, haggling, and compromise, the Social Security Act introduced a two-tier welfare system, one for mostly white male industrial workers in interstate commerce who were entitled to insurance, and another for the truly

needy, who generally remained truly needy.”⁶³ Nevertheless, the Social Security Act was a significant first step toward ER's dream of a social safety net. And it helped demonstrate that a more just society could be achieved when women were part of the process.

Throughout her career, ER continued to claim an innocence about the workings of the world that belies her political acumen. One example is her description of the behind-the-scenes work she did as First Lady to effect change in the government. Rather than acknowledging the influence she wielded, ER explained this work in the following words: “I have since discovered that a great many government people to whom I referred letters regarded them as a mandate requiring prompt attention. Evidently they thought that if what I suggested was not done I would complain to my husband. Actually, all I ever expected was that they would be interested in accomplishing the things that should be accomplished, since government is supposed to serve the good of the people.”⁶⁴

In reality, ER forged astute alliances with key players in FDR's administration, working with them to accomplish her own political agenda, which was often significantly more progressive than her husband's. Harry Hopkins, head of FERA and the WPA, had started his career as a social worker in New York City and shared ER's concern for the disadvantaged. Hopkins hired other ER allies as well: Ellen Woodward was a particular advocate for women, while Mary McLeod Bethune and Aubrey Williams (a liberal white man from Alabama) fought inside the system to ensure that African Americans received fair treatment in FERA and WPA programs.

ER was less close to Harold Ickes, FDR's Secretary of the Interior, but the two shared the goal of racial equality and worked together on establishing social services for Native Americans, creating the homestead community of Arthurdale, and ensuring that African Americans were eligible for work in the Civilian Conservation Corps. And with US Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, ER strategized on how to improve the conditions of women workers, including the myriad women newly working in government programs.⁶⁵

Yet, despite these elaborate negotiations taking place behind the scenes, ER walked a fine line in her public presentation. She was a vocal advocate for women's advancement and did not apologize for wanting to contribute to society. At the same time, she was aware that the American public could take only so much change at a time. In her own words, “No leader can be too far ahead of his followers.” *She* was not the one they had elected, and as such, she needed to be mindful of how she chose to advocate for the issues she cared about.

⁶³ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 281–82.

⁶⁴ Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 133.

⁶⁵ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 267–69.

Much of her work took place behind the scenes, in the form of one-on-one discussions with people in a position to make things happen—including her husband. In the words of one of her biographers, “She had to mute herself.”⁶⁶



Ellen Woodward, 1939. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-hec-27842.

ER's Message to Women

Throughout her time as first lady, ER directed much of her message to US women. “My Day” was understood to be a column primarily of interest to women, and the *Woman's Home Companion* and the *Ladies Home Journal*, where she wrote monthly columns, both had a female readership. Author Lisa R. Barry has argued that in focusing so much of her writing to women, “Mrs. Roosevelt saw herself as a teacher charged with educating U.S.

⁶⁶ Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*, 134; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 5.

women about civic responsibility.”⁶⁷ Similarly, her book *It's Up to the Women* spanned a range of topics “from dish-washing to high diplomacy.” Scholar Jane Marcellus argues that ER's far-ranging content was in fact a strategy of “drawing in traditional women for whom overt feminism was threatening.”⁶⁸ These examples illustrate ER's adept balancing act between traditional and modern roles for women.

Publicly, ER repeatedly reminded her audience that she still had respect for women's traditional roles. She was a wife and mother first, she insisted, and thought that was how it should be. For instance, a 1944 profile of her in the *New York Times* quoted her as saying:

Why, I don't know that I can claim any real achievements. Of course the thing I am proudest of is that I have produced five children, all of whom, I can say without reservation are pretty nice people. I think I have been a good executive—at least I have managed, in addition to a good many other things, to run a number of homes quite smoothly and comfortably and without making too much fuss about it. On the whole, I feel that I have handled the domestic side of my responsibilities fairly capably. But I don't seem to have any outstanding feats to report.⁶⁹

When we consider that by 1944, ER was the longest-serving first lady in US history; had played pivotal roles in presidential elections, the appointment of the first female cabinet member, and the hiring of substantial numbers of women into federal positions; had overseen the creation of the New Deal community of Arthurdale; was fighting tirelessly for the inclusion of African Americans in federal relief programs; wrote a nationally syndicated daily column; and was the author of 10 books, the understatement that is evident in this quotation is stunning. Notably, in this article ER also employs the trope of her acting only as FDR's “eyes and ears,” with the addition, this time, of a similar story about serving the same role for Louis Howe when his health was failing.⁷⁰ Quite likely, this balancing act of forging new ground for women while appearing to adhere to traditional conceptions of womanhood was a key element of ER's success. By working behind the scenes and being willing to let others (usually men) take the credit, she came across as less threatening. Similarly, her unwavering respect for the traditional roles of wife and mother enabled her to skirt some of the accusations of “abnormality” that other public women—particularly those without husbands or children—were subject to beginning in the 1920s.

⁶⁷ Lisa R. Barry, “Eleanor Roosevelt: A Rhetorical Reconstruction of First Ladydom,” in *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Molly Meijer Wertheimer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 187.

⁶⁸ The first quotation is from the Hartford Courant, quoted in Roosevelt and Lepore, *It's Up to the Women*, xi; the second quotation is from Jane Marcellus, “‘It's Up to the Women,’” *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 3 (September 2012), 398, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.615631>.

⁶⁹ Kathleen McLaughlin, “Mrs. Roosevelt Wants ‘Just a Little Job,’” *New York Times*, October 8, 1944.

⁷⁰ McLaughlin, “Mrs. Roosevelt Wants ‘Just a Little Job’”; for additional examples of this approach, see Eleanor Roosevelt, *It's Up to the Women* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1933); Eleanor Roosevelt, “What I Hope to Leave Behind,” *Pictorial Review*, April 1933.

Keeper of the New Deal's Legacy

After an unprecedented 13 years in the White House, ER had become even more skilled in accomplishing her political goals in ways that made use of feminine ideals rather than shattering them. In advocating for the US to accept thousands of British children fleeing war in Europe in 1940, for example, ER presented herself as a woman naturally concerned about the safety of “little children,” rather than an expert on immigration.⁷¹

With FDR's death in April 1945, however, ER's time as first lady came to an end. Yet, rather than moving quietly into retirement, ER launched a new phase of her career, one more thoroughly influenced by her own vision. She did not abandon her husband's legacy; rather, she skillfully incorporated the ideals of his administration into her ongoing work. In the words of historian Allida Black, without people quite realizing it, ER became “the consummate liberal power broker.”⁷²

She remained very much in the public eye. Her syndicated column “My Day” actually increased in circulation in the aftermath of FDR's death; she continued writing it until shortly before her death. By this time, she also wrote a monthly column, “If You Ask Me,” which began in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1941. She was a sought-after speaker and was regularly in the news.⁷³ Indeed, ER scholar Maurine Beasley reminds us that, upon FDR's death: “To a large extent a substantial part of her career, which continued until her death in 1962, lay before her. She remained a power in the Democratic Party, and the nation's ‘Most Admired Woman,’ as reflected in public opinion polls, during most of the remaining years of the twentieth century. Her appointment as U.S. representative to the United Nations from December 1945 until January 1953 led to her leadership of the Human Rights Commission, which produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the most important documents of the twentieth century.”⁷⁴ In addition, she was a vocal opponent of McCarthyism; a strong supporter of African American civil rights; and mentored numerous progressive activists of a younger generation, including Joseph and Trude Lash, Pauli Murray, and Dorothy Height.⁷⁵

⁷¹ John F. Sears, *Refuge Must Be Given: Eleanor Roosevelt, the Jewish Plight, and the Founding of Israel* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2021), 60–71.

⁷² Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, quotation from 3; see also Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 2, 216.

⁷³ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 216.

⁷⁴ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 214.

⁷⁵ Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow*, 164–70; Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 4–5, 15–16; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 218.

ER put particular hope in the youth activists of the 1940s and 1950s, seeing them as building on the ideals of the New Deal and carrying them into the future.⁷⁶ She met Joseph Lash in 1939, when he was on his way to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee about his political activism. He and ER became fast friends, and he provided her entrance into the student left movement. Both ER and Lash met Trude Pratt through the International Student Service, and in 1944, Lash and Pratt married. They continued their friendship with ER until her death, after which Lash wrote several volumes of biography about ER.⁷⁷

ER met civil rights activist Pauli Murray in late 1938 when Murray cc'd her on a letter to FDR protesting his statements around race. They developed a bond around their mutual efforts to end the oppression of African Americans. In the words of historian Patricia Bell-Scott, "They helped each other see possibilities beyond their immediate vision, and this broadened view reverberated in the causes they served."⁷⁸

Dorothy Height was a young African American YWCA worker when she met both ER and Mary McLeod Bethune at a 1937 meeting of the National Council of Negro Women at the YWCA Emma Ransom House in Harlem. From there, Height worked closely with ER on the World Youth Congress, held at Vassar College in 1938, and their work continued through both's involvement with the American Youth Congress.⁷⁹

Although ER's accomplishments are most certainly her own, she was aided in her efforts by her association with the late president. In fact, she kept this association foremost in people's minds, frequently referring to FDR in her public writing and speaking. This strategy, in the words of scholar Sara Polak, acted "as a kind of megaphone in the public debate of FDR's opinions" and allowed her to project "herself as his proxy" after his death. Most people, even close friends, continued to call her "Mrs. Roosevelt" over "Eleanor," which enforced her associations with the political dynasty her family had become.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 16–19.

⁷⁷ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 305–9.

⁷⁸ Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, xviii.

⁷⁹ Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*, 15–17; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Three, 1939–1962* (New York: Viking, 2016), 211.

⁸⁰ Sara Polak, *FDR in American Memory: Roosevelt and the Making of an Icon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 90–94; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 2, 5–6.



Eleanor Roosevelt at the dedication of the *USS Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1945.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 48223821(347).

In the postwar years, she traveled frequently, mostly for her own work, but also occasionally to attend the dedication of monuments to FDR. She would report on such memorial efforts in her “My Day” column, noting for example, her attendance at an FDR memorial dinner in Oregon; the creation of an FDR monument in Sugar Notch, Pennsylvania; and the dedication of the FDR Memorial Bridge connecting Lubec, Maine, to Campobello Island.⁸¹ She also extrapolated directly on her husband’s legacy, as when she granted an interview on the topic to the National Broadcasting Company in 1959.⁸² These activities served the dual purpose of preserving both her husband’s memory and the public’s association of her with his legacy.⁸³

⁸¹ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, August 2, 1948,” *United Feature Syndicate*, August 2, 1948, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>; Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, April 27, 1956,” *United Feature Syndicate*, April 27, 1956, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>; Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, August 10, 1962,” *United Feature Syndicate*, August 10, 1962, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

⁸² *Eleanor Roosevelt Interview on FDR's Legacy*, 1959, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU5K17DfpQI>.

⁸³ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 2, 5–6, 222; Polak, *FDR in American Memory*, 90–96.

ER's role as the keeper of FDR's memory was so enshrined in the public imagination, argues historian Allida Black, that when the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC, was being planned in the 1990s, no one objected to ER's "placement at the end of the memorial, tacitly accepting her role as the most stalwart defender of her husband's legacy."⁸⁴

ER's Use of Gendered Power

Eleanor Roosevelt's efforts to keep her husband's memory closely associated with her own public image can be understood as the deft strategy of a political operative. It can also be seen as the continuation of a career-long effort by ER to insist that her work was simply a natural extension of her role as wife, mother, and kind-hearted woman—all elements of a traditional feminine ideal.⁸⁵

In a similar vein, we can view her prolific writing either as the work of a public relations genius well ahead of her time, or as the chatty small talk of a nonthreatening woman in late middle age and, later, old age—not so very different from one's own grandmother. In addition to her books, articles, and daily and monthly columns, ER maintained a mind-boggling level of correspondence. This correspondence encompassed scores of friends and associates to whom she personally wrote as well as the voluminous mail she received from strangers. Indeed, roughly *two million* pages of ER's correspondence are preserved at the FDR Presidential Library, and the majority of this consists of letters to and from the general public.⁸⁶

People wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt because she seemed approachable. This scion of a New York Old Money dynasty who once knew nothing of cooking or childcare—let alone poverty—somehow was able to convey her sincere compassion for the problems of individuals in need. Much of this achievement was due to ER's extraordinary capacity for empathy, combined with a unique writing ability that enabled her to convey her concern simply and unpretentiously. Some of this achievement, too, was due to the gender expectations of her letter writers. ER seemed approachable because she was the *female* face of the New Deal, because she let it be widely (and consistently) known that she was a wife and mother first, not a politician.⁸⁷ This public presentation allowed her to have a profound impact on politics while simultaneously insisting that she was simply fulfilling a woman's traditional role.

⁸⁴ Allida M. Black, "Struggling with Icons: Memorializing Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt," *Public Historian* 21, no. 1 (January 1999): 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3379112>.

⁸⁵ Barry, "Eleanor Roosevelt: A Rhetorical Reconstruction."

⁸⁶ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 111; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 4; Black, "Struggling with Icons," 69.

⁸⁷ Black, "Struggling with Icons," 68.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Uses of Val-Kill

Eleanor Roosevelt’s home at Val-Kill went through many incarnations over its lifetime, much as ER herself did. Indeed, the site provides its own lens on ER’s political evolution, serving, as author Emily Herring Wilson puts it, “as a testing ground for the forceful woman Eleanor would become.”¹ It was both her private residence and a place of reflection and work. She spent many hours here in private thought, but also used the property as a gathering point for friends, family, and political associates. And in her widowhood, she wielded international influence from this humble site in the Hudson River Valley.

This chapter considers Eleanor Roosevelt’s story from the perspective of place. It considers Val-Kill as a physical expression of ER’s life, from its inception in 1924 to her death in 1962. ER’s friendship with Nan Cook and Marion Dickerman, and the role it played in her own political development, can best be understood through the home they made together at Val-Kill. Her ideals were expressed through Val-Kill Industries. And her own residence, built in the former factory building, reflects her values in later life. In addition, her use of the residence for political purposes enabled her to frame her work within women’s traditional sphere of the home.

The Val-Kill Property

The land that is now Val-Kill was once part of both Munsee Lenape and Mohican territories. It was known in those times by various names: Pakaksing, Pooghkeepsingh, and Winnakee. The area was colonized by the Dutch in the 17th century, and they called the creek that runs through the property “Fall Kill” (the Dutch phrase for valley stream).²

¹ Emily Herring Wilson, *The Three Graces of Val-Kill: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marion Dickerman, and Nancy Cook in the Place They Made Their Own* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 67.

² “Our Home on Native Land,” Native-Land, accessed December 5, 2020, <https://native-land.ca>; Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds., *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 542; “GNIS Detail—Fall Kill,” United States Geologic Survey, 1980, https://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=GNISPQ:3:::NO::P3_FID:949882; Barbara E. Pearson, “Excerpts, Historic Structure Report: Stone Cottage” (Boston: National Park Service, North Atlantic Region, September 1980), 2.

Franklin Roosevelt purchased the property, then known as the Bennett Farm, in 1911 from Annie M. Bennett. The property is located about two miles from the Roosevelts' home at Springwood. The sale consisted of 194 acres and carried the stipulation that all existing structures be removed from the property. It was thus in a largely natural state during the 1910s and 1920s, and the Roosevelt family used the land for picnics. In 1924, FDR suggested that ER, together with her friends Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman, build a cottage for themselves at the site; the home was completed in 1926. Around this same time, in 1925, FDR purchased an additional 192 acres adjoining the Val-Kill property.³ FDR granted ER, Cook, and Dickerman a life lease on about eight acres of the land in 1926, after the cottage had been constructed. The woman, in turn, agreed to pay rent that was equivalent to all taxes on the property.⁴ FDR used the remaining acreage as a tree farm.⁵

The year 1926 was when ER, Cook, and Dickerman built the Val-Kill Industries factory, and additions were made to that building in 1928 and 1929. When the factory closed in 1936, the building was renovated into living quarters for ER.⁶ It served as ER's primary residence until her death in 1962, when her son John converted the building into four apartments, which he rented out. John sold the property in 1970, and in 1977, Congress established the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site. The National Park Service then obtained the property.⁷

In 2023, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site comprises 181 acres, mostly fields, wetlands, and forested areas. There are five main structures: Val-Kill Cottage, the former factory building, the stables/garage building, the playhouse (formerly a garage and toolshed), and the dollhouse (a play area for ER's grandchildren). The swimming pool, the tennis courts, and a large stone barbeque are also still in existence.⁸

³ Louis Torres, *Historic Resource Study: Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site (Val-Kill), Hyde Park, New York* (Denver: Denver Service Center, Mid-Atlantic/North Atlantic Team, Branch of Historic Preservation, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, 1980), 17–18, <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS115622>.

⁴ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 9–11.

⁵ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 19–23.

⁶ Barbara E. Pearson, "Excerpts, Historic Structure Report: Val-Kill Cottage (The Factory Building)" (Boston: National Park Service, North Atlantic Region, September 1980), 2.

⁷ Pearson, "Excerpts, Historic Structure Report: Val-Kill Cottage (The Factory Building)," 5; Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 157.

⁸ Bronwyn Krog, "Val-Kill, Hyde Park, NY," National Register of Historic Places Nomination (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1980), 7.1–7.5, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75317458>.



Val-Kill Pond, NPS/Frank Futral. Private Collection.

The Friendship of Nan Cook and Marion Dickerman

The story of ER's use of Val-Kill begins with the friendship of the Roosevelts with Nan Cook and Marion Dickerman, a fellow couple comprised of Democratic operatives in New York state. Although the two would not meet until 1922, Nancy Cook and Eleanor Roosevelt were born just six weeks apart in 1884, in different parts of New York state, and died less than three months apart in 1962.⁹ Marion Dickerman, Cook's life partner, was also born in New York state, in 1890. She and Cook became a couple in 1913, while both were students at Syracuse University, and remained paired for nearly 50 years, until Cook's death in 1962. More information on the two women can be found in Chapter 1 and information on their political work can be found in Chapter 3.

Louis Howe introduced Dickerman to the Roosevelts in the spring of 1922, when he arranged for her to dine at Hyde Park. During that visit, she charmed them both with her passionate discussion about improving women's working conditions. By that time, Cook

⁹ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 105–8; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 26.

and Dickerman were both active in the Women's Division of the New York Democratic Committee. Cook was employed there as the executive secretary, while Dickerman earned her living as a teacher at Todhunter School, a private girls' academy in New York City. Cook joined the friendship with the Roosevelts in June 1922, when she met ER in person after arranging for ER to give the keynote speech at a fundraiser for the Women's Division.¹⁰

The Women's Division brought ER into contact with many new friends and mentors, as discussed in Chapter 3. It also got her out of her usual social circles and talking with a wider range of people. ER, Cook, and Dickerman teamed up with additional Women's Division volunteers Caroline O'Day and Elinor Morgenthau to travel the state setting up local chapters and networking. O'Day (1869–1943) was older than the other women, a wealthy activist who became chairwoman of the Women's Division in 1923 and would later serve in the US House of Representatives from 1935 to 1942. Historian Susan Ware identifies O'Day as one of the cadres of well-positioned women in government who helped shepherd the success of the New Deal. Morgenthau (1892–1949) had been friends with ER since the 1910s, the two having met through their husbands, who were both active in New York political circles. Her husband, Henry Morgenthau, would later serve as FDR's Secretary of the Treasury.¹¹

Amid the many new friendships ER was making in the early 1920s, her relationship with Cook was particularly special. Her friendship with both Dickerman and Cook had a feverish, crush-like energy to it, particularly in its early days. As their associate Esther Lape explained it, ER “was very much in need of more affection and devotion than was available to her, and these two women gave it to her.”¹² Dickerman herself declared that ER “loved Nan much more than she did me.” ER's biographer Blanch Wiesen Cook agrees, stating, “Whether or not the friendship that developed between them embraced amorosity, from their very first meeting their relationship was marked by an element of romance.”¹³

¹⁰ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 105–8, 134–27; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 15–17; J. M. Fenster, *FDR's Shadow: Louis Howe, the Force That Shaped Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 156; “Nancy Cook (1884–1962),” Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project; George Washington University, n.d., <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/nancy-cook-1884-1962>.

¹¹ Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 28; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 344–48, 383–87; Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage, Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 8–10, 150.

¹² Quoted in David Michaelis, *Eleanor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 226.

¹³ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One, 1884–1933* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 319–23, quotations from 322 and 320.



Clockwise from upper left: Nancy Cook, Marion Dickerman, Caroline O'Day, and ER, circa 1928.
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, Cook-Dickerman Collection.

The Creation of Val-Kill Cottage

Legend has it that the idea for a home at Val-Kill originated with Franklin Roosevelt. He, too, had an energetic friendship with Cook and Dickerman, particularly enjoying his political discussions with Dickerman. And he was no doubt happy that the companionship of these two women, along with ER's work with the Women's Division that they had facilitated, had given his wife a new lease on life, giving her a purpose beyond the immediate family.¹⁴

According to the standard telling, during a picnic near the Fall Kill stream with ER, Cook, and Dickerman in late summer 1924, FDR suggested that the three women build a cottage on the site so that they could enjoy the area whenever they desired, instead of being dependent on invitations to Springwood, which was presided over by FDR's mother. FDR already owned the property that would become Val-Kill, having purchased it from a local farmer in 1911. He gave the women a life lease to eight acres of his larger holding and supervised the construction of the original cottage. All three women contributed to the cost of construction.¹⁵

The design of the cottage was the result of input from Nancy Cook, FDR, architect Henry Johnston Toombs, and builder Henry Clinton. Henry J. Toombs (1896–1967) was affiliated with the esteemed New York City architecture firm of McKim, Mead, and White. He most likely became involved in the project through his cousin Caroline O'Day, a close friend of ER, Cook, and Dickerman. Toombs would go on to work on many buildings associated with FDR, including the Warm Springs Foundation and FDR's own Warm Springs cottage, both located in Toombs' native Georgia, and Top Cottage, built in the late 1930s just up the hill from Val-Kill.¹⁶

The resulting cottage at Val-Kill was an L-shaped, one-and-a-half-story structure with a gabled roof. The first floor was dominated by an expansive living room, one-and-a-half stories high, with a large fieldstone fireplace occupying most of one wall. Other downstairs rooms included a dining room, a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a pantry. The second floor was composed of a bedroom and another bathroom. It was furnished with some of the first furniture pieces produced by Val-Kill Industries.¹⁷

¹⁴ Susan Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick: The Love Affair That Shaped a First Lady*, 2017, 74–77; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 21.

¹⁵ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 7–11; 18; Quinn, *Eleanor and Hick*, 76–77; Krog, “Val-Kill National Register Nomination,” 7.2.

¹⁶ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 24–31.

¹⁷ Krog, “Val-Kill National Register Nomination,” 7.2–7.3; Kenneth S. Davis and Marion Dickerman, *Invincible Summer: An Intimate Portrait of the Roosevelts, Based on the Recollections of Marion Dickerman* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 56.



Val-Kill Cottage, by Matthew Garrett.
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site.

At the time this cottage was built, it included a stream-fed swimming pool. The dimensions were 50 feet by 25 feet, with water ranging from four to six feet in depth. It became a center of the Roosevelts' social life, and FDR used it as part of his ongoing physical therapy. This original pool was removed in 1935, and a new pool was added. The later pool was designed by M. K. Hasbrouck, the same engineer who designed the pool at the White House.¹⁸

Construction on the cottage was completed in 1926, and the trio held a house-warming party for the rest of the Roosevelt family on New Year's Day. Although the house was not entirely finished, it signaled the start of a new era for ER.¹⁹

¹⁸ Krog, "Val-Kill National Register Nomination," 7.3–7.4; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 59–60; Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 61.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 53.

Val-Kill as an Act of Independence

The construction of a home separate from her mother-in-law, husband, and children (aged 18 to 8 in 1924) was ER's declaration of independence. Although she loved Hyde Park, she had never felt completely at ease at Springwood, where her mother-in-law ran the household and the dynamic between Sara and Eleanor had been established when ER was still a young bride.²⁰ In contrast, at Val-Kill Cottage, ER could live as she wanted, in the company she chose and according to her values. It was the site where she renegotiated her relationship with her husband and her children, where she developed her own vision of the work she would do in the world, and where she nurtured bonds with friends and political allies.

It was a space created for her to spend time with the people she chose—not just Cook and Dickerman, but the many other friends and associates who visited, either to collaborate on political projects or just to spend time relaxing together. Having such a space allowed ER to develop more fully as an individual. She was still in constant interaction with others—as was her way—but she (along with Cook and Dickerman) had the power to choose who entered their domain.²¹

Notably, during the same period when Val-Kill Cottage was being conceived, in the fall of 1924, FDR made his first trip to Warm Springs, Georgia, where he ended up building his own retreat. These separate homes, where both Franklin and Eleanor could keep their own company, were a reflection of a larger realignment of their relationship in the 1920s, discussed in Chapter 2. They remained true partners while at the same time opening their marriage to the influence and affection of others. Their family grew as Louis Howe, Missy LeHand, Earl Miller, Nan Cook, and Marion Dickerman entered their inner circle of intimates.²²

All indications are that this outward expansion was good for both FDR and ER. She thrived within her chosen circle of compatriots, just as FDR benefited from a greater indulgence of his extroverted nature. ER hinted at a more expansive interpretation of “home” in her 1932 article “What I Hope to Leave Behind,” when she stated, “What is the real value of a home? To me the answer is that the value lies in human contacts and associations.” Nevertheless, in keeping with her tendency to emphasize her traditional female role, discussed in the previous chapter, she elaborated with examples from a more conventional view of home, “the help which I can be to my children, which my husband and I can be to each other, and what the children can be to us.”²³

²⁰ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 263; Davis and Dickerman, *Invincible Summer*, 54–55.

²¹ Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 65–67.

²² Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 59–60; Fenster, *FDR's Shadow*, 208–9; Hazel Rowley, *Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), xvii.

²³ Eleanor Roosevelt, “What I Hope to Leave Behind,” *Pictorial Review*, April 1933.

Val-Kill Cottage illustrates many of the nuances of the Roosevelts' new approach to life. It was always understood to be the home ER shared with Cook and Dickerman; but Sara, FDR, and the children also enjoyed the property. This was, in fact, the plan from the beginning; part of FDR's enthusiasm for the idea of a cottage at Val-Kill involved diverting the stream for a swimming pool to help him continue his therapy in the aftermath of polio. Val-Kill was the site of frequent Roosevelt family gatherings, whether intimate family socials or larger events in which both ER and FDR presided as hosts. And ER's daughter Anna used the cottage for her 1926 honeymoon with her first husband, Curtis Dall.²⁴

Related to these changes within the Roosevelts' relationship, ER took a decidedly different approach to raising her two youngest sons than she had with her three older children. The older three had been born early in the Roosevelt marriage when ER had not yet found a balance of power with FDR's mother. They had largely been raised by their grandmother and a series of strict, and sometimes cruel, nannies. The younger children—Franklin, born in 1914, and John, born in 1916—were raised in somewhat different circumstances. Their father was involved in politics by the time of their birth, and ER had begun her public life in earnest around the time they were toddlers. Then FDR was stricken by polio when Franklin Jr. and John were still quite young.²⁵

These circumstances led to a significant amount of parental distraction; John was later to say of his father's bout with polio, "From then on, I had no parents."²⁶ FDR's mother continued to play a significant role in the upbringing of her grandchildren. Beginning in the early 1920s, however, ER did make a concerted effort to take her two youngest children on extended trips and to indulge their physical energy in a way that their father was no longer able to do.²⁷ Cook and Dickerman often accompanied ER on these trips, allowing for an alternative, if also only occasional, family configuration. In her reminiscences, Dickerman recalled various occasions when she spent time alone with the boys on these trips, as when Franklin Jr. requested to go driving with her as his 15th birthday present in 1929.²⁸

²⁴ Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 53–63; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 107.

²⁵ Marion Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman" (1973), 11–12, 1682 PRCQ vol. 1, Columbia University Oral History Research Office Archive, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscripts Library; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 178–79.

²⁶ Quoted in Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 212.

²⁷ Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman," 12–14, 41–46.

²⁸ Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman," 44.



Franklin Roosevelt Jr., Marion Dickerman, John Roosevelt, and ER
on the deck of the transatlantic ocean liner *Regina*, 1929.
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, Cook-Dickerman Collection.

The Honeymoon Cottage

Despite all the visits and entertaining, Val-Kill Cottage was, first and foremost, the home of three intelligent, creative, political women in the midst of a passionate friendship that crackled with romantic energy. FDR recognized this and supported it—first, by suggesting the cottage, and later by teasingly referring to it as the three women’s “love nest” and “honeymoon cottage.”²⁹

Throughout most of the 1920s, Cook and Dickerman were ER’s constant companions. Whenever circumstances demanded they separate for any length of time, ER would write letters telling them both how much she missed them: “I miss you so much,” “life is quite empty without your dear presence,” and “I’d like to go off with you and forget

²⁹ Davis and Dickerman, *Invincible Summer*, 50; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 54.

the rest of the world existed.” The threesome made a special pact to celebrate each other’s birthdays alone together, and they giddily embraced the delight of making a home together.³⁰

Among their other domestic enthusiasms, they ordered joint stationery and linens embroidered with their three initials, both reminiscent of common wedding presents at the time. Friends, too, celebrated the happiness the three had found together, sending housewarming gifts of china and silver. ER went so far as to order Cook and herself matching tweed suits of knickerbocker pants and vests. At the beginning of their time together at the cottage, the three also shared a bedroom.³¹

Such behavior between the three women has been treated affectionately, perhaps even patronizingly, by historians because of its girlish nature. Emily Herring Wilson even compares the threesome to “college girls.” Such characterizations are telling. The gestures—along with Cook giving ER a bouquet of violets upon their first meeting—were reminiscent of schoolgirl behavior, particularly those attending girls’ schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the very era these three were then living in. However, I would argue that the behavior of these middle-aged women reminds us of schoolgirls because “schoolgirl crushes” with other girls is one of the few models we still have for unabashed romantic attachment between women.³²

Homosexuality, as a characteristic that made an individual a certain type of person, developed as a concept in the late 19th century and did not gain wide medical awareness in the United States until the turn of the 20th century. Even then, it was mostly a label applied to people at the margins of society—those living in poverty, African Americans, immigrants. This focus on people who were already societal outsiders created an odd loophole for men and especially women in the professional classes, as discussed in Chapter 3. However, by the 1920s, a backlash against women’s recent political gains led to more suspicion of same-sex partnerships among professional women, even though such relationships remained common. However, same-sex romantic attachments among *adolescents*, particularly female adolescents, remained perfectly acceptable until decades later.³³

³⁰ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 87–90, first quotation from 88; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 322–23, second quotation from 323; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 56–58, third quotation from 56.

³¹ Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 43, 53–54, 61; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 320.

³² Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 53.

³³ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Hanne Blank, *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012); Susan Ferentinos, “An Unpredictable Age: Sex, Consumption, and the Emergence of the American Teenager, 1900–1950” (PhD diss., Bloomington, Indiana University, 2005), 157–58.

The framework of schoolgirl crushes would have been familiar to everyone in the Roosevelts' class, including and perhaps especially ER herself. She had, after all, been educated in a girls' boarding school and had been the object of many such crushes by her fellow classmates. Her feelings for Cook and Dickerman, while unique in their intensity, were likely not viewed as problematic by any of those involved. In fact, the openness with which they exercised their attraction to one another may have been the very thing that kept their relationship acceptable. The love they shared was visible to everyone who saw it.³⁴

Nevertheless, ER's friendship with Cook and Dickerman did draw some condemnation from others. Her mother-in-law Sara could not understand why ER desired to have a home separate from Springwood and was disdainful of what she called this "all-woman cottage nonsense."³⁵ ER's scathingly witty cousin Alice referred to Cook and Dickerman as "female impersonators."³⁶ And after a visit from the trio, ER's Auntie Bye commented, "Alas and Alack! Since politics have become [ER's] choice of interest all her charm has disappeared, and the fact is emphasized by the companions she chooses to bring with her."³⁷ Possibly, these opinions reveal the generational changes explored in Chapter 1; ER's older relatives (though also Cousin Alice) were judging her and her friends by 19th-century standards of womanhood that had become obsolete by the 1920s.

As ER's confidence and independence grew, she established a few other special friendships, intense and infused with romance along the lines of her friendship with Cook and Dickerman. During the Val-Kill Cottage period, ER brought two of her other such friends—Earl Miller and, later, Lorena Hickok—to visit her shared home. Cook and Dickerman accepted these visits, though they were not particular fans of either Miller or Hickok. They felt that Miller was not deferential enough to ER, and they feared he was taking advantage of her generosity. They found Hick uncouth and perhaps not worthy of ER's affection. Possibly, Cook and Dickerman also felt threatened by ER's enthusiasm for these two other intimates.³⁸

³⁴ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 116–20; Katy Coyle and Nadiene Van Dyke, "Sex, Smashing, and Storyville in Turn-of-the-Century New Orleans: Reexamining the Continuum of Lesbian Sexuality," in *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, ed. John Howard (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 54–72.

³⁵ Quoted in Jan Jarboe Russell, *Eleanor in the Village: Eleanor Roosevelt's Search for Freedom and Identity in New York's Greenwich Village* (New York: Scribner, 2021), 115; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 65–66.

³⁶ Quoted in Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 86.

³⁷ Quoted in Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 252–53.

³⁸ Russell, *Eleanor in the Village*, 130–31; Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 131; Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 277.

Home to a Community of Women

Numerous historians, including Estelle Freedman and Blanche Wiesen Cook, have examined female support networks and their role in women's political activism. These historians generally argue that such networks began to fray after the ratification of the 19th amendment, as women abandoned their own organizations and networks in favor of integrating traditionally male organizations.³⁹ While this may indeed have been the overall trend, women's divisions within the US political parties created a transitional space, where women could continue to learn from and draw support from each other in a women-only environment, while at the same time readying themselves to work alongside men in the overall business of their party. For ER and her associates, the Women's Division of the New York Democratic Committee played this role, and while the work of the organization was centered at their headquarters in New York City, many of the women's social bonds and support networks were developed at Val-Kill. In the words of author Emily Herring Wilson, "Val-Kill was not just a weekend retreat. It was an accommodating community where women could meet and talk over a range of interests."⁴⁰

ER, Cook, and Dickerman were all active in the Women's Division, and so their home was a logical gathering point for other activists in their circle. Even before the cottage was finished, Caroline O'Day (who never lived at Val-Kill) wrote in the *Women's Democratic News*, "When politics is through with us we are retiring to this charming retreat that is now rearing its stone walls against the beautiful cedars of a Dutchess County hillside."⁴¹ O'Day would also become part of the Val-Kill Industries partnership, contributing money to the enterprise and writing articles to publicize its work.⁴²

ER herself encouraged the idea of Val-Kill as a "charming retreat" for Democratic women. In her June 30, 1936, "My Day" column, written a few days after the conclusion of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, she wrote:

Such a bevy of ladies as came up here yesterday to recuperate from the Convention! Miss Mary Dewson; Mrs. William H. Good; Mr. and Mrs. Henry Goddard Leach; Colonel and Mrs. Frederick Greene from Albany; Mrs. Daniel O'Day and her daughter Elia; Mrs. George Backer; Mrs. Charles W. Tillet, Jr., of North Carolina; Miss Fannie Hurst and last but not least, Miss Frances Perkins who was too exhausted to get up early enough in the morning to arrive

³⁹ See, for example, Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism: Lillian Wald, Crystal Eastman, Emma Goldman," *Chrysalis*, no. 3 (1977): 43–61; Estelle B. Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930," in *Feminism, Sexuality, and Politics: Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 21–35. This essay was originally published in 1979.

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 112.

⁴¹ Quoted in Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 1, 324.

⁴² Wilson, *Three Graces of Val-Kill*, 112–13.

for lunch, but who arrived in the afternoon in time to spend an hour with us all. Miss Cook was their hostess at the Val-Kill Cottage. They lay around the lawn and some of them went in swimming, they all came over in a body to see the President. The rest of the time they ate and slept and talked.⁴³

Although this passage gives the impression that the women were on vacation, undoubtedly much of the “talking” that took place involved debriefing from the convention and political strategizing for the upcoming presidential campaign. We can see in this vignette a counterpart to the men’s clubs and fishing trips that men of this era used to forge alliances and make deals.

FDR’s Uses of Val-Kill

FDR was involved in Val-Kill from the beginning. He suggested the idea of the cottage and oversaw its construction, going so far at one point to state, “If you three girls will just go away and leave us alone, Henry [Toombs] and I will build the cottage.”⁴⁴ He seemed delighted at ER’s friendship with Cook and Dickerman, as well as his own, telling Nan and Marion at one point after a misunderstanding about upkeep costs, “Oh ye of little faith! Don’t you poor idiots realize how much I care for you both and love having you at Val Kill!”⁴⁵ And he also thought it important that ER have a place where she could go to be away from the strains of public (and family) life. In another letter to Cook and Dickerman, he wrote of his wife, “There is no possibility of keeping her from getting tired in New York. The only way is to plan to get her away from New York and when the cottage is built that will be one means toward the end.”⁴⁶

FDR was also excited at having a pool to use in Hyde Park. Always an avid swimmer, in the aftermath of polio, he found water to be a beneficial part of his ongoing therapy. He originally planned to locate a pool near Springwood, but ER convinced him that it would be more widely enjoyed if it were located near the Val-Kill stream. FDR agreed, and work on the pool began in August 1924, well before construction began on the cottage.⁴⁷

⁴³ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, June 30, 1936,” *United Feature Syndicate*, June 30, 1936, 30, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Davis and Dickerman, *Invincible Summer*, 46.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Davis and Dickerman, 59.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Davis and Dickerman, 44.

⁴⁷ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 56–61.



ER, FDR, Missy LeHand, and Earl Miller enjoy the pool at Val-Kill.
This is the first swimming pool at Val-Kill. 1932.
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, Cook-Dickerman Collection.

The Val-Kill swimming pool became a center of social life for the Roosevelts. Many home movies and photographs portray the Roosevelts and their associates in or around the pool, and in her “My Day” columns of the 1930s and 1940s, ER frequently mentions swimming there with her grandchildren.⁴⁸ In preparation for the royal visit of the United Kingdom’s King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, ER even mused whether they might like to swim in the Val-Kill pool, which the King did indeed do, after the famous hot dog barbecue at Top Cottage.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See, for instance, “My Day” columns from July 25, 1938; August 30, 1941; August 24, 1948.

⁴⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, June 6, 1939,” *United Feature Syndicate*, June 6, 1939, 6, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

FDR was also in regular attendance at Val-Kill picnics. In 1933, Cook oversaw the construction of a large outdoor fireplace made of fieldstone, to accommodate the growing number and size of the picnics occurring at the site. Cook also ensured that a smaller grill was located next to FDR's customary chair, so that he could cook his own meat to his liking. This anecdote suggests the frequency with which FDR dined outdoors at the cottage.⁵⁰

At least once, in 1933, FDR also held his birthday party at Val-Kill. Birthdays were a big affair for Franklin. Between 1934 and his death in 1945, he used the occasion as a fundraising effort for polio treatment and research. Birthday Balls were held all over the country on the president's birthday, raising about a million dollars per year. Privately, FDR would celebrate his birthday with a close group of friends known as the cuff-links gang, a reference to the gift FDR had given the men who had worked most closely with him on his unsuccessful vice-presidential campaign of 1920. As time went on, the group expanded to include some women, including ER, Cook, and Dickerman. The group would gather annually to celebrate FDR's birthday, and these parties often involved costumes and skits. In January 1933, after FDR had won the presidential election but before he was inaugurated, he chose to hold his celebration at Val-Kill cottage.⁵¹

In 1984, Elliott Roosevelt, reflecting on the role Val-Kill had played in his parents' life, said, "My mother came here to work and think things out, while I think my father always considered Hyde Park his home and he came to Val-Kill for fun."⁵² While FDR clearly enjoyed himself at Val-Kill, his son's assessment discounts the ways FDR used the site politically. While Springwood was indeed his home, he often used that site to place himself within history. It was there he enjoyed the fruits of his ancestors' legacy, awaited election returns, and situated his presidential library, the first of its kind in the world.⁵³ In contrast, at Val-Kill—and, to a lesser extent, Top Cottage—FDR sought to portray himself more casually, always enjoying himself, playing with his grandchildren, eating hot dogs.

Scholar Sara Polak has argued that "political leaders in democratic systems are bound to represent a far larger constituency than just themselves and, therefore, need a public image that is recognizable to an immense range of citizens."⁵⁴ Arguably, FDR's public image was most relatable when he was at Val-Kill. Perhaps this is why he chose to hold an annual picnic for the press there.⁵⁵ And throughout his presidency, there were

⁵⁰ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 78–81; Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman," 339.

⁵¹ Davis and Dickerman, *Invincible Summer*, 111; FDR Presidential Library & Museum, "FDR Birthday," FDR Library, n.d., <https://www.fdrlibrary.org/fdr-birthday>.

⁵² Shawn G. Kennedy, "At a Picnic, Roosevelts Recall Their First Lady," *New York Times*, 1984.

⁵³ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933–1938* (New York: Viking, 1999), 388; Sara Polak, *FDR in American Memory: Roosevelt and the Making of an Icon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 84–89.

⁵⁴ Polak, *FDR in American Memory*, 31.

⁵⁵ Davis and Dickerman, *Invincible Summer*, 130–31.

numerous other occasions when he held press-worthy events at Val-Kill. In 1935, he invited reporters to the site to attend an annual picnic held for the White House employees who traveled with the Roosevelts between Washington and New York. In 1939, the Roosevelts took the King and Queen of England for a swim in the Val-Kill pool (though the Queen opted not to get wet, sitting poolside instead). In 1940, eight hundred Democratic women workers, from five New York counties, attended an event held at Val-Kill, where they were briefly greeted by President Roosevelt. And that same year, after the dedication of the FDR Library, guests were invited to a picnic at Val-Kill.⁵⁶

Val-Kill Industries

Even while the cottage was still under construction, Cook, Dickerman, and ER, along with Caroline O'Day, decided to create a business together to provide job training and employment to members of the community surrounding Hyde Park. As Dickerman told the story, “[at Val-Kill Cottage] There was one room that was to be for Nan to build the furniture for the cottage. Well, we soon found it wasn’t big enough, and the idea grew, and Eleanor had some money that she’d inherited, so she built the shop, and we started the Val-Kill Furniture [Business]. Franklin was particularly interested, not so much in the furniture as he was in the fact that we tried to bring in some of the local farm boys and give them employment over the winter.”⁵⁷

Val-Kill Industries, organized in 1926, is best remembered for the finely crafted furniture reminiscent of early American designs—its first products. At various times in the company’s decade of existence, pewter items and woven textiles were also produced.⁵⁸

As referred to in the Dickerman quotation above, the vision for the business had more to do with social good than generating profit. According to ER, their goal was “to build up in a rural community a small industry which would employ and teach a trade to the men and younger boys, and give them adequate pay, while not taking them completely

⁵⁶ “Roosevelt Directs the Fun at a Picnic: ‘Musical Bumps’ and Ducking of Apples Enliven Program at Hyde Park Party,” *New York Times*, 1935; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Three, 1939–1962* (New York: Viking, 2016), 77; Charles Hurd, “Roosevelt Looks to ‘4 More Years,’ He Tells Visitors,” August 9, 1940; Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, July 6, 1940,” *United Feature Syndicate*, July 6, 1940, 6, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

⁵⁷ Dickerman, “The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman,” 24.

⁵⁸ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 543; Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 92–93; Janelle Warren Finley, “Administrative History of Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site” (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2011), 176.

from the farm. . .,” in order to “keep many of the more ambitious members in the district, who would otherwise be drawn to the cities.” Although their initial focus was on men, as the company expanded into other crafts, it began employing women as well.⁵⁹

The Factory Building

Construction of the Val-Kill Industries factory took place in 1926. Toombs served as the architect, with significant input from Cook, who knew the most about the process of building furniture. John Eylers was the general contractor. ER funded the building, and ER, Cook, and Dickerman split the costs of the machinery and equipment.⁶⁰

The original factory was designed in a plain, utilitarian style. It was two stories tall, with walls made of cinderblock covered in stucco. According to the site’s National Register documentation, “The interior contained a large shop on the first floor, a second, smaller shop above the garage, a three-room apartment, several closets and washrooms, and a dormitory.”⁶¹

Several additions expanded the building in 1928 and 1929. A one-story wing was added in 1928, which was originally a finished room and later became a showroom. Another two-story building was added in 1929. It was originally a separate building but is now joined with the original factory building. This second building contained a wood-working shop on the ground floor and a finishing room on the second floor.⁶²

⁵⁹ Frank Futral, “Val-Kill Industries: A History,” *Hudson River Valley Review* 26, no. 1 (Autumn 2009): 24 (including quotations); Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 90–91.

⁶⁰ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 51.t

⁶¹ Krog, “Val-Kill National Register Nomination,” 7.5.

⁶² Krog, “Val-Kill National Register Nomination,” 7.2. A full list of renovations to the building can be found in Pearson, “Excerpts, Historic Structure Report: Val-Kill Cottage (The Factory Building).”



Otto Berge, Arnold Berge, and Frank Landolfa in the Val-Kill furniture factory, circa 1929.
National Park Service, Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, Cook-Dickerman Collection.

The Business (and Todhunter School)

Cook was a skilled woodworker and took the lead in designing Val-Kill Industries' products, as well as organizing and supervising the furniture production. Her interests and talents are likely why the women chose to pursue the specific business they did. However, their emphasis on home crafts was also in keeping with wider trends in the United States at the time. Curator Frank Futral places the inception of Val-Kill Industries at the crossroads of the American Arts and Crafts movement and the 1920s Colonial Revival, prompted in part by the sesquicentennial of the nation's founding, which was celebrated the year Val-Kill Industries was founded, 1926. Both movements were reactions against increasing

urbanization and industrialism and emphasized simplicity and artisanry.⁶³ Indeed, the three women traveled together to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's mansion in Virginia, so that Cook could study Jefferson's furniture designs, creating a clear link to the Colonial Revival.⁶⁴

The women hired Frank Landolfi, a recent Italian immigrant from a family of woodworkers, to serve as lead furniture maker, and the company began operations in 1927. That same year, Dickerman, who was teaching at the Todhunter School in New York City, was given the opportunity to buy the school. She discussed the possibility with Nan, Eleanor, and Franklin. John, the Roosevelts' youngest child, was about to leave home to begin boarding school, and ultimately, ER decided to partner with Dickerman and Cook in purchasing the school. ER joined Dickerman as a teacher, with both women splitting their weeks between New York City and Val-Kill.⁶⁵

The company initially enjoyed moderate success. A pewter foundry and weaving operation were added in 1934 and 1935, and the incorporation of textiles enabled ER, Cook, and Dickerman to employ women as well as men, since weaving was historically done by women, while men were more likely to have experience woodworking. However, the Great Depression was a hard blow to Val-Kill Industries, as it was to so many businesses. The enterprise continued for a time, but ER and her partners decided to divest themselves in May 1936. They gave the company's trademark and some of its furniture-making machinery to an employee, Otto Berge, who continued the business off-site. They leased the pewter forge to Arnold Berge, Otto's brother. (This building later became the playhouse.) And ER's former housekeeper Nellie Johannsen, who had headed up the weaving operation at Val-Kill Industries, continued weaving as part of her operations at Val-Kill Inn, the tea room she had started on the Val-Kill property.⁶⁶ ER's decision to create a household and engage in two separate professional enterprises with Cook and Dickerman within the span of three years (1924–27) is a testament to the fervor and intensity of the three women's friendship.

⁶³ Futral, "Val-Kill Industries: A History," 21–22; see also Marla R. Miller and Anne Digan Lanning, "'Common Parlors': Women and the Recreation of Community Identity in Deerfield, Massachusetts, 1870–1920," *Gender & History* 6, no. 3 (November 1, 1994): 435–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1994.tb00213.x>; Susan Williams, *Alice Morse Earle and the Domestic History of Early America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); M. J. Rymysz-Pawlowska, *History Comes Alive: Popular Culture and Public History in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁶⁴ Futral, "Val-Kill Industries: A History," 26–27; Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman," 25.

⁶⁵ Dickerman, "The Reminiscences of Marion Dickerman," 26–27. For more on Todhunter School, see pp 26–35.

⁶⁶ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 263, 543; Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 94, 117–24; Futral, "Val-Kill Industries: A History," 32–35.

Applying Lessons from Val-Kill: Arthurdale

Val-Kill Industries was ER's first foray into putting her ideas for social improvement into action. It was a social experiment that foreshadowed many of the experiments of the New Deal that created honorable work for people as a means of pulling them out of poverty. Of these later experiments, the West Virginia community of Arthurdale is most associated with the first lady, and we can see in this effort an expansion on the ideas first articulated at Val-Kill.

In 1933, Lorena Hickok went to work for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), a New Deal program aimed at providing immediate assistance to people worst hit by the Great Depression. Hick's job was to travel the country reporting on conditions for FERA director Harry Hopkins. In August 1933, ER accompanied Hick on one such trip to West Virginia, and ER was deeply affected by the desperation she witnessed there. Upon learning that West Virginia University already had a plan to move some of the poorest families to tracts of farmland formerly owned by the Arthur family, the first lady took control of the project as a federal demonstration project.⁶⁷ In the words of Blance Wiesen Cook, "ER imagined a rural experiment in living that would be economically self-contained and agriculturally self-sufficient. She believed it was possible, as an experimental aspect of the New Deal, to build a community that promised democracy, dignity, education, work, and culture."⁶⁸ We see in this a similar motivation to her reasons for starting Val-Kill Industries, although Arthurdale was envisioned as a full community, not just a site of employment.

Two months later, the project in West Virginia was underway, and eventually 165 families moved to Arthurdale, where they were given land, a furnished home, farm equipment, livestock, and the opportunity to work in two small-scale factories modeled on Val-Kill Industries. The residents would then have 30 years to pay back the government for its investment. But the experiment was not without its problems. The homes were of poor construction, and the project went significantly over budget. Most controversial of all were ER's efforts to ensure that the residents of her experimental community matched the demographics of the surrounding area, which was racially mixed. Despite the first lady's wishes, after the first round of residents was selected, it was clear that only white Christian families were being accepted into the program. ER tried again to provide equal opportunity to all applicants but experienced backlash from the existing Arthurdale residents, who were

⁶⁷ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History. Episode 5: The Rising Road (1933–1939)* (Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2013); Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 316–19.

⁶⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 133.

opposed to living in a racially mixed community.⁶⁹ This firsthand experience with virulent racism prompted the first lady to reach out to African American leaders and learn more about issues facing African American communities.

It was in Val-Kill Industries—and her later housing experiment Arthurdale—that ER distinguished herself from countless other people who wish to contribute to the betterment of humanity but never actually seek out new solutions through trial and error. Thus the Industries era at Val-Kill represents the tangible results of ER's growing confidence and independence. She took on this experiment in the company of trusted friends, and with them, she began to take ever-greater risks in order to address the needs of those less fortunate.

A New Life for the Furniture Shop

ER, Cook, and Dickerman, along with their partner Caroline O'Day, divested themselves of Val-Kill Industries in 1936. The main reason for this decision was Nancy Cook's health, which was suffering under the strain of managing the enterprise while also contributing time to the Democratic Party.⁷⁰ However, growing tension between ER and Cook likely also contributed to the decision. During FDR's 1932 presidential campaign, ER had begun her passionate friendship with Lorena Hickok. The developing romance, coupled with ER's new duties as first lady, meant significantly less time and energy to devote to the idyll she had created with Cook and Dickerman at the cottage. Likely, this change of priorities, along with the economic troubles facing the furniture shop, exacerbated whatever health challenges Cook was facing. The decision to terminate the partnership also came within weeks of Louis Howe's death, and it is possible that the pain of losing such a dear friend and advisor led ER to make decisions that would reduce emotional demands in other parts of her life.⁷¹

Along with the decision to sell the business came the plan for ER to move into her own living quarters at Val-Kill. In 1937, once the furniture shop had been vacated, ER began refurbishing the building into her new home. It would include living quarters for herself, rooms for her secretary Malvina Thompson, and extensive guest quarters that could handle the great volume of visitors who came through Hyde Park.⁷² In May 1937, she wrote, "I am now getting excited over my own apartment. It seems to be really coming on

⁶⁹ Michaelis, *Eleanor*, 316–19; Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 130–52.

⁷⁰ Futral, "Val-Kill Industries: A History," 35; Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 131.

⁷¹ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 131, 137–38.

⁷² Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 155–57; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 543.

and I think in June I'll be able to move furniture in." The following month, she wrote, "A lovely day & over my ears in furniture movement & list making! What a lot of things there are to get to start even a small house! I love it however."⁷³

The renovations were completed by the summer of 1937. As ER described in her final memoir, the renovated building contained a small apartment (for Tommy), two living rooms, a dining room, seven bedrooms, a dormitory, two large porches downstairs, and a sleeping porch upstairs.⁷⁴



Exterior of ER's home in the former Val-Kill Industries factory building, by W. D. Urbin. National Park Service.

In the summer of 1938, Cook and ER had a row that ultimately severed the closeness of Cook and Dickerman's friendship with ER. There were many financial details to hammer out about the changes taking place at Val-Kill, as ER moved out of the cottage she'd built with Cook and Dickerman and took over occupancy of the former factory building, which

⁷³ Quoted in Joseph P. Lash and Eleanor Roosevelt, *Love, Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 255.

⁷⁴ Krog, "Val-Kill National Register Nomination," 7.2.

they had also invested in together. NPS employee Louis Torres details these disputes in the first historic resource study of the site, but the evidence suggests that much of the financial haggling was a substitute for the emotional pain of the threesome growing apart.⁷⁵

The 1938 argument had the air of a romantic breakup. Dickerman had been away at the time of the confrontation, and upon her return days later, Cook met her on the dock with eyelids “red and swollen with weeping.”⁷⁶ On the other side, ER took to her bed, despondent, refusing to see or talk to anyone. The situation was so unusual that her secretary Tommy called Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read to alert them, saying she had “never before” seen ER behave in such a manner. After a week, however, ER pulled herself together enough to send a reassuring note to Lape and Read, although she still seemed overwrought, saying that she had realized that she had been wrong to trust someone dear to her. “I have recovered from my disappointment. That, after all, is based on my own weakness. . . . I simply had to let you know that all is now well. I am unable to lead a life based on an illusion.”⁷⁷

There were hard feelings on both sides after this argument, but after a few months of silence, Cook wrote to ER in November 1938:

I know now that I was under a tremendous emotional strain for a very long time. I would not bring myself to face the fact that your feelings were changed towards me.

As time went on I became worse than a box of dynamite for my affection had not altered. We both said harsh & unkind things and I am more sorry than I can say for anything I said. I realize now that my actions and reactions were solely a defense to cover up my real feelings.

Whatever has taken place in the past I want you to know that you are very dear to me and always will be.⁷⁸

Apparently, in the heat of the moment, Cook had declared that everything the three had shared had been done by Dickerman and her “for the sole purpose of building [ER] up.” Such a statement would have gone straight to many of ER’s ongoing insecurities—that her closest associates had ulterior motives in befriending her, that she was taking undue credit for her accomplishments, and that she was not worthy of love or praise. And perhaps for this reason, she never again trusted the women she had held so close for more than 15 years. The three were eventually able to regain a level of cordiality. They remained neighbors on the Val-Kill property, and all three women continued to work in Democratic Party politics, but the friendship had been severed.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 131–55; see also Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 530–37.

⁷⁶ Davis and Dickerman, *Invincible Summer*, 150.

⁷⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 530–32.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 148.

⁷⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, v. 2, 530–37, quotation from 534.

For most of the next decade, Cook and Dickerman continued to live in the original Val-Kill Cottage while ER lived next door in the refurbished factory. The couple vacated their cottage in 1947, at which time ER bought them out of any ownership obligations for the property.⁸⁰ During FDR's lifetime, she usually stayed at her cottage only when he was not in Hyde Park; when he was there, she most often stayed at Springwood with him. After his death, ER bought Val-Kill and roughly 825 acres of surrounding land from FDR's estate. Springwood was turned over to the National Park Service, and her cottage at Val-Kill became her main home, though she also retained a residence in New York and the family home on Campobello Island.⁸¹

The Home of the Former First Lady

When FDR died while in office in April 1945, Harry S. Truman became president and ER needed, rather suddenly, to move out of the White House. In considering her options while accompanying her husband's body home from Georgia, ER decided that she would make Val-Kill her main home in retirement.⁸² In reality, some of her most productive years occurred after her time as the nation's first lady. She served as part of the first US delegation to the United Nations. She became a vocal advocate for World War II refugees and the African American civil rights movement. And she continued writing, giving speeches, and maintaining an astounding level of personal correspondence. She was perhaps not able to spend as much time at Val-Kill as she'd hoped; nevertheless, after the White House, ER considered Val-Kill her permanent residence.⁸³

Val-Kill was more than a home, however. It was also a place of work; ER entertained a range of dignitaries at Val-Kill, as explored later in this chapter. She also did a great deal of writing from this location, and so whenever ER was at Val-Kill, whether before or after FDR's death, a secretary was there with her. For nearly 30 years, this secretary was Malvina Thompson, known in the Roosevelt family as Tommy, who served as ER's assistant from the 1920s until her death in 1953.⁸⁴

Tommy was an integral part of ER's private home at Val-Kill from its inception. The renovation of the factory building was, in fact, overseen by engineer Henry Osthagen, with whom Tommy had a long-standing romantic relationship, and living space for Tommy was

⁸⁰ Finley, "Administrative History of Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site," 176.

⁸¹ Finley, "Administrative History of Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site," 183; Maurine Hoffman Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 215; Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 543.

⁸² Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 159.

⁸³ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 543.

⁸⁴ "Malvina Thompson Dies; Mrs. Roosevelt's Secretary," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 13, 1953.

included in ER's vision for her new home. Tommy obtained a divorce from her husband, Frank Schneider, in 1938, the same year of the renovation, and from then on, she considered Val-Kill her home. Toward the end of Tommy's life, ER reduced her travel schedule to accommodate Tommy's declining health and energy, since throughout their working relationship, Tommy traveled with ER on nearly all her trips. Ultimately, Maureen Corr was brought on to assist with Tommy's duties, but Tommy remained in ER's employ until she died in 1953 at age 61. Corr then took over as ER's lead secretary and continued in this position until ER's own death nine years later.⁸⁵

ER, with Tommy's help, came fully into her independent identity after FDR's death. However, she continued to fulfill the duties of a former first lady, and in fact made good use of her association with the former president to accomplish her own goals. In the words of historian Allida Black, "Eleanor Roosevelt's dual stature as FDR's widow and as a political leader in her own right made her the major symbol for both protecting FDR's legacy and expanding domestic reform."⁸⁶

Val-Kill played an important role in ER's efforts, both to keep her association with FDR fresh in people's minds and to use that connection to further her own political goals. To begin with, the home she chose as her permanent residence was just down the road from what might be considered a shrine to her late husband, comprising as it was a historic site, a museum, and a research center dedicated to his memory. Indeed, on the first anniversary of her husband's death, ER oversaw the dedication of the Home of FDR National Historic Site, officially turning his beloved Springwood over to the people of the United States.⁸⁷

Every Memorial Day, ER presided over a ceremony at the FDR burial site, located two miles from Val-Kill at Springwood. The ceremony was officially hosted by the Roosevelt Home Club, and ER would host a luncheon "with sixty to ninety or more" guests at Val-Kill beforehand. As David Gurewitsch's wife Edna explained, "It was very important to Mrs. Roosevelt that President Roosevelt be remembered on the occasion when those who had died on the battlefields of our wars were being memorialized. Added to her compassion for the significance of the holiday was her determination that her husband's memory be honored as one who had given his life for his country."⁸⁸

As part of her work with the United Nations, ER regularly entertained foreign dignitaries at Val-Kill, and part of this hospitality involved the ritual of visiting FDR's burial site en route to her home. In 1959, at the height of the Cold War, she invited no less a figure

⁸⁵ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 512–15; Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 155; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 73–74, 227.

⁸⁶ Allida M. Black, *Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 133.

⁸⁷ Shannon B. Butler, *Roosevelt Homes of the Hudson Valley: Hyde Park and Beyond* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2020), ch. 8.

⁸⁸ Edna P. Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls: The Friendship of Eleanor Roosevelt and David Gurewitsch* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 140–42.

than Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union, to visit her at the cottage. Although the visit was brief, it did involve “a moment of deepest solemnity and ceremony” when Khrushchev laid a memorial wreath on FDR’s grave.⁸⁹

In addition, as part of her effort to link herself to FDR’s memory, at Val-Kill ER surrounded herself with references to her husband and her time in the White House. Family photos lined the walls, simultaneously giving the place a homey feel while also reminding visitors that *this* family included two presidents. These photos were joined with others depicting various well-known visitors to her home, including Harry Truman, Prime Minister of Canada Mackenzie King, and French President Vincent Auriol. In her living room hung a cotton textile that had been a gift from a woman employed by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, a program of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration, and other New Deal crafts and art pieces were on display throughout the house. Even the nameplate on her desk reading “Elanor Roosevelt”—although on the surface just a charming, though misspelled, gift from a local child—kept the Roosevelt name before any visitors ER entertained in her living room.⁹⁰

The Home of a Matriarch

After Franklin’s death, ER and her son Elliott purchased 825 acres—including Val-Kill—from FDR’s estate, with the intention both of ER owning her home outright and of Elliott starting a farm.⁹¹ Of the total purchase price of \$124,000, ER contributed \$87,000 and Elliott contributed \$37,000, via mortgage. ER made it clear to her other children that “I have made no gift to Elliott. . . you will get from the estate all that you would probably have received in any case.”⁹² Mother and son set up Val-Kill Company Inc. through a partnership agreement, with Elliot owning 75 percent of the business and ER owning 25 percent. Farm operations included dairy, beef, pigs, chickens, turkey eggs, and Christmas trees. Beginning in 1948, the enterprise also experimented with managing a hotel and restaurant,

⁸⁹ Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* (New York: Norton, 1972), 272–73. See also Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, April 27, 1950,” *United Feature Syndicate*, April 27, 1950, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>; Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, October 16, 1950,” *United Feature Syndicate*, October 16, 1950, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

⁹⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, “Living Room,” National Park Service, n.d., <https://www.nps.gov/elro/learn/historyculture/living-room.htm>; Louise Tutelian, “Eleanor Roosevelt’s Place Apart,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2004, sec. Travel, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/17/travel/escapes/eleanor-roosevelts-place-apart.html>.

⁹¹ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 161.

⁹² Lash, *Eleanor*, 172.

Val-Kill Inn, in one of the farmhouses on the property. Ultimately, however, Val-Kill Company did not prove profitable, and around 1950, the company began divesting itself of land, including the land where Top Cottage was located.⁹³

During the era of Val-Kill Company, Elliott and his family lived in Top Cottage, and ER was grateful to have one of her children on site with her while she adjusted to life after her 40-year marriage. In 1951, she wrote to Elinor Morgenthau, “If Elliott were not at Hyde Park I could not live here.”⁹⁴ That same year, her son John and his family also moved to Hyde Park, taking up residence in Val-Kill Cottage (also known as Stone Cottage), where they lived until 1970.⁹⁵

In addition to two of ER’s five children living on her property, Val-Kill served as the extended family’s gathering spot, the place where they vacationed and celebrated holidays and family milestones. Over the years, the Roosevelt family had grown quite large. ER biographer Joseph Lash provides a snapshot of the clan in 1952. “In addition to her five children,” he writes, the family included “eighteen grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, as well as assorted cousins of various degrees, nine daughters-in-law and ex-daughters-in-law to most of whom she was confidante, referee, and oracle and whose Roosevelt offspring often stayed with her at Hyde Park. Her brother Hall’s second wife, Dorothy K. Roosevelt, and her three daughters Amy, Janet, and Diana also made Val-Kill a stopping-off place whenever they came East.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Lash, *Eleanor*, 172; Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 162–63.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Lash, *Eleanor*, 173.

⁹⁵ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 73, 178.

⁹⁶ Lash, *Eleanor*, 176.



ER with family members at Val-Kill, circa 1956.
National Park Service, Eleanore Roosevelt National Historic Site, ELRO 1586;
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, 79-76:30.

Edna Gurewitch's description of the summer of 1958 further illustrates the centrality of family in ER's final decades:

Mrs. Roosevelt's ninety-four-year-old uncle, David Gray (formerly U.S. ambassador to Ireland), came up from Sarasota for the summer. In and out were sons and their wives—most often Franklin and Sue, who had a farm in nearby Poughquag, occasionally, Jimmy visited from his home in California, alone or with his wife, Irene. . . . [Anna spent a few days there] to see her daughter, Ellie ("Sisty") Seagreaves and her grandchildren, who were vacationing there. . . . The eldest grandson, Curtis ("Buzz"), was an occasional summer visitor, but . . . we saw a good deal of Curtis's half brother, John Boettiger, Jr., during the summer, as well as Mrs. Roosevelt's niece Ellie Elliott Roach, who lived in Rhinebeck with her four children and husband, George.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 138.

Beyond blood relatives, ER maintained an extensive family of choice—friends she loved who were always welcome visitors. As early as 1939, Joseph Lash was visiting regularly and sometimes stayed for multiple weeks. Earl Miller was there so often that Tommy declared in a 1941 letter to Esther Lape, “Apparently, we have a steady boarder in one Lt. Miller.”⁹⁸

Lorena Hickock was also a regular guest. She spent the winter of 1950–51 at Val-Kill, in what ER described as “her winter writing effort.” In the mid-1950s, suffering from health problems and running out of money, she moved into Tommy’s former rooms at ER’s cottage. The living arrangement apparently put a strain on the friendship, however. In early 1958, Hick moved into a small apartment in the town of Hyde Park; ER assured her, “I feel you will be better off in the village.” Hick remained in Hyde Park until her death in 1968.⁹⁹

David and Edna Gurewitsch, after they were married in 1958, had a room in ER’s Val-Kill home, and they visited nearly every other week in the warm weather. According to Edna: “We were given a room of our own at Val-Kill, large and airy, with a mixture of ponderous, dark, old-fashioned furniture and lovely pine bookcases and tables. Except for the spacious porch extending from Mrs. Roosevelt’s upstairs bedroom (on which she often slept summer and winter), ours was the only room with a terrace, and from it one could easily see Stone Cottage through the trees, [then] the residence of the John Roosevelt family.”¹⁰⁰

Edna Gurewitsch continues:

David and I had lovely holidays in Hyde Park. Mrs. Roosevelt personally arranged the flowers in our bedroom and left books to interest us. All guests were free to do entirely as they pleased. We were expected only to be prompt for meals—and even that was not a hard-and-fast rule. It was, in fact, easy to comply, as mealtime gatherings could be such fascinating social occasions. On July and August weekends, it was rare to find a spare seat around the table outside on the screened-in porch. When we left on a Sunday night, bundles of vegetables and flowers from the garden were placed in the trunk of our car.¹⁰¹

Despite the relative simplicity of ER’s retirement home, she also maintained some customs of the early-20th-century upper class. She employed numerous servants at Val-Kill. As she described them in the third volume of her autobiography, “In addition to a secretary, I have a couple who live at the cottage—Mr. and Mrs. Lester Entrup, a woman who comes in daily, a man who drives my car when necessary and two men on the place.

⁹⁸ Lash and Roosevelt, *Love, Eleanor*, 288–91, 309; Joseph P. Lash and Eleanor Roosevelt, *A World of Love: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends, 1943–1962* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), xxii, quotation from xxii.

⁹⁹ Lash and Roosevelt, *A World of Love*, 335, 432, 476, quotations from 335 and 476; Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 138; Jean Christie, “Hickok, Lorena,” in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Butler, *Roosevelt Homes of the Hudson Valley*, ch. 9.

¹⁰⁰ Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 134.

¹⁰¹ Gurewitsch, *Kindred Souls*, 137–38.

We employ temporary helpers for special occasions. Most of the time, however, we make everything as simple as possible.”¹⁰² A reader unfamiliar with the volume of visitors passing through ER’s home may well have remarked upon the idea that ER considered a staff of six to be keeping things “simple.” By the 1950s, domestic staff were far less common than they had been in ER’s youth.

ER also maintained a 19th- and early-20th-century custom of the wealthy by hosting an annual Christmas party for servants. This was a tradition at Springwood when it was Sara Roosevelt’s home, and it likely originated before that. After Sara’s death in 1941, ER carried on the tradition, even after Springwood was no longer in the family and no longer employing legions of staff. Her “My Day” column from December 22, 1958, noted, “On Saturday morning I went to Hyde Park for last-minute Christmas preparations. In the afternoon I had my usual party for the people who used to be employees of my husband and my mother-in-law on the old place in Hyde Park, as well as those who work for John and me today.” Presumably, this party was held at Val-Kill.¹⁰³

The Home of a Power Broker

At the time of FDR’s death, Eleanor Roosevelt enjoyed extraordinary prestige. A December 1945 Gallup poll compiled the American public’s preferences for potential presidential candidates from both parties. ER tied with Henry Ford and Bernard Baruch for fourth place. The only three people who ranked above her had been crucial to the US victory in World War II: General Douglas MacArthur, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Henry Kaiser, of shipbuilding fame. Such a ranking would be impressive under any circumstances. When we consider that, 75 years later, this country has *still* not elected a female president, this honor given to ER seems monumental.¹⁰⁴

ER chose not to pursue elected office, opting instead to leave that avenue open for her offspring.¹⁰⁵ However, she remained a public figure. A review of her correspondence sheds light on the array of issues she remained involved in: “In the years immediately after World War II, there was much correspondence relating to the problems of refugees and displaced persons, American relief efforts, the United Nations, and American foreign policy. There also was correspondence concerning domestic politics, communism, the

¹⁰² Quoted in Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 167.

¹⁰³ Torres, *Historic Resource Study*, 130; Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, December 22, 1958,” *United Feature Syndicate*, December 22, 1958, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

¹⁰⁴ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 215.

¹⁰⁵ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 215.

McCarthy hearings, presidential campaigns, racial integration, and school desegregation. Minority rights were a recurring theme, and every year there were letters concerning the plight of blacks, American Indians, and women.”¹⁰⁶

At Val-Kill, ER entertained unceasingly. Guests included Hyde Park neighbors, family, lifelong associates, new friends, boys from the nearby Wiltwyck school, national celebrities, and world leaders. Such a diverse guest list reveals her generous heart and interest in others. It also was a tool in the construction of her post-FDR public image. ER dedicated much of her life to being an advocate of the downtrodden, and she decided that to do this most effectively, she needed to reject the trappings of the upper class she was born into.

Her cottage at Val-Kill reflects that decision. It is surprisingly simple and homey, nothing like the Roosevelt home at Springwood. At Val-Kill, ER made a point of entertaining people of a range of backgrounds, not just dignitaries. Her guests were engaged in the common cause of social justice, rather than united because of class interests, as was often the case in upper-class social circles. Even when she did host world leaders, such as Khrushchev, Nehru, and Tito, they too experienced the humble cottage, for her home reflected ER’s own values, that everyone deserves to be treated with fairness and dignity.

The cottage also served as a way for ER to transmit her values and beliefs to the people of the United States. As the African American civil rights movement gained momentum after World War II, ER grew even more vocal in her support of racial equality. She joined the board of the NAACP; made a public visit to Highlander Folk School, which trained civil rights activists; and argued that “civil liberties and civil rights were the cornerstones of American democracy.”¹⁰⁷

In addition to her other advocacy, ER promoted her agenda of social equality through hospitality. This was a practice she began at the White House, where she hosted African American leaders for meals and invited them to official events. Even Sara, who was far more socially conservative than either Franklin or Eleanor, hosted African Americans in her home on occasion. Civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune often recounted the hospitality and respect Sara showed her when Bethune attended a 1927 luncheon for the National Council of Women held in the Roosevelts’ Manhattan townhouse. Bethune was the only African American guest, and Sara made a point of inviting the educator to sit beside her. Bethune went on to develop a friendship with Sara, which she described as “one of the most treasured relationships of my life.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 114.

¹⁰⁷ Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 218; Black, *Castling Her Own Shadow*, 2, quotation from Black.

¹⁰⁸ Kevin M. Burke, Robert Heinrich, and Steven J. Niven, “The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders,” Historic Resource Study (Draft) (Hyde Park, NY: National Park Service, June 2022), 62.



ER hosts UNESCO visitors at Val-Kill, 1949. United Nations.

ER continued the advocacy-through-hospitality approach at Val-Kill. Pauli Murray received her first overnight invitation to the cottage in 1947 and visited regularly in the 1950s. On one occasion in 1952, Murray was accompanied by her elderly aunts, Pauline and Sallie.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Walter White, head of the NAACP from 1929 to 1955, was a regular guest at ER's cottage and often brought his mother along. ER's hospitality no doubt carried special weight to African American elders like Murray's aunts and White's mother, since they carried memories of the rise of US Jim Crow, also known as the nadir of US race relations.¹¹⁰

In addition, Val-Kill served as a site of diplomacy, and in this way, it was an extension of ER's work as a delegate to the United Nations, a position she held from 1945 until 1952. *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* posits that ER made three foundational contributions to this international body in its early years. She was one of the key authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which laid out fundamental conditions to which

¹⁰⁹ Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship: Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 184, 208–10.

¹¹⁰ Burke, Heinrich, and Niven, "The Roosevelts and African American Civil Rights Leaders," 32.

all humans were entitled. She also became a leader in the post-World War II refugee crisis, through her work on a UN committee three, focused on humanitarian, social, and cultural concerns. Finally, ER served as an unflagging supporter of the international body at a time when its existence was still controversial. As but one example, “In her travels at the end of the United Nations sessions, she carried throughout the world the message of the necessity for an international organization dedicated to collective security and world peace.”¹¹¹

Interestingly, her enthusiasm for the organization did not extend to the effort to locate the headquarters of the United Nations at Hyde Park. As historian Charlene Mires has detailed, although unsolicited by the international body, boosters from hundreds of towns across the United States vied to be the location of the UN headquarters.¹¹² Hyde Park, New York, was among those towns submitting proposals, and the idea made it surprisingly far in the selection process; decision makers included the town on their tour of possible locations. Although FDR had been a controversial figure, there was solid support for the idea of permanently associating the UN with his memory. ER, however, remained publicly neutral on the question. In Mires’s words, “A practiced expert in deflecting requests for public endorsements, she had declined to become involved with the campaign.”¹¹³

Despite this reluctance, when the UN headquarters were eventually located in New York City, ER saw an opportunity for the soothing landscape and casual atmosphere of Val-Kill to support her work in international relations. As discussed earlier, she hosted a variety of world leaders at her home, including Khrushchev, the leader of the United States’ largest mid-20th-century threat, the Soviet Union. She hosted Khrushchev on two occasions, signaling her commitment to diplomacy and world peace in dealing with US enemies.¹¹⁴ She also hosted larger events for UN delegates and staff, such as a 1948 event for UNESCO and a 1949 picnic for her fellow members of committee three. Such hospitality fostered goodwill among the international representatives and provide a relaxed atmosphere in which to consider ideas and build partnerships.¹¹⁵

* * *

¹¹¹ Beasley, Shulman, and Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, 534–39, quotation from 536; Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 219–20. See also Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001).

¹¹² Charlene Mires, *Capital of the World: The Race to Host the United Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

¹¹³ Mires, *Capital of the World*, 151–54, quotation 154.

¹¹⁴ Lash, *Eleanor*, 272–73.

¹¹⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day, May 2, 1949,” *United Feature Syndicate*, May 2, 1949, 19, <https://erpapers.columbian.gwu.edu/browse-my-day-columns>.

As the location most closely associated with Eleanor Roosevelt, Val-Kill contains all of this public figure's contradictions. Over the course of 40 years, it was both a family gathering spot and a place for her to develop a separate identity. It was the site of ER's first social experiment and the retreat she went to in order to ground herself. It was touched by all those closest to her—Franklin, Nan, Marion, Earl, Hick, and David—as well as by hundreds of people she barely knew. In addition, this place captures the fine balancing act that was ER's career: wielding great power for the benefit of the needy and in the guise of traditional maternalism.

Conclusion

Eleanor Roosevelt's life is both extraordinary and representative. She was born into wealth, served as first lady, and was a fierce advocate for the downtrodden, and in all these ways she was exceptional. At the same time, her personal choices serve as a symbol of changing gender and marriage systems in the United States that occurred during her lifetime.

In the first half of her life, ER adhered to an older vision of womanhood and 19th-century marriage, deferring to her husband and her mother-in-law and devoting herself to caring for her family. In middle age, however, she enthusiastically embraced the idea that women had an important role to play in public life. This change was in part brought about by circumstance, as World War I, changes in her marriage, and FDR's battle with polio demanded that she move beyond an older model of womanhood. Her new approach was also, in part, an acceptance of a solidly 20th-century model of gender and sexuality. The Roosevelt marriage took on a modern cast, as both ER and FDR sought individual fulfillment and a life of service pursuing their own agendas, which often but not always overlapped.

Val-Kill is a product of the second half of ER's life, and it reflects her evolving values and vision. It is a place that was built in community, where both Roosevelts, but especially Eleanor, gathered people, engaging in conversation and collaboration. It was where she shaped her thinking on various issues and experimented with new ideas, both in action and in writing. The site was both a personal spot, where she spent time with her loved ones, and a public space where she acted on her beliefs.

The Roosevelts' unconventional marriage encourages us to probe the question, "What makes a family?" And Val-Kill, as a site where the Roosevelts lived out their lives and their ideals, prompts us to consider "What makes a home?" The answers to such questions are unique to each individual, but Val-Kill and the Roosevelts remind us that these questions are nevertheless worth exploring and that great things can be accomplished when we create a family and home life that adhere to our values and our vision of a better world.

Acknowledgments

I am of the age when humility sets in. These days, I can barely go an hour without reflecting on the ways others' generosity and goodwill—not to mention sheer random luck—have shaped the course of my life. I enjoy the insight this offers, but it makes the writing of acknowledgments difficult. Where to start?

Reluctantly, I will spare readers a full accounting of my debts. However, I will start a bit earlier than you might expect. Back in the 1990s, Wendy Gamber took a chance on me. I was far from what she may have hoped for in a graduate student, but she rolled up her metaphorical sleeves and went to work. She nurtured my love of women's history, taught me the mysteries of academia, and steadfastly mentored me before launching me into a career I have cherished.

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Bob Beatty gave me the idea to write my first book, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites*, and this book brought me in contact with Megan Springate, who has played a major role in the NPS's efforts to incorporate LGBTQ history into its interpretation and programs. In 2016, Megan invited me to cofacilitate a workshop, and there I met Frank Futral, curator at Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Site (which is administratively linked to Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site).

Frank has been instrumental in this project. We have shared many conversations about Eleanor Roosevelt's unconventional life and legacy, and he has had an important impact on my thinking. In addition, he encouraged me to approach a well-trod subject from a new direction, provided personalized tours of the historic site and archives, was ever at the ready to answer questions, and has read more versions of this report than anyone.

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Margaret Puskar-Pasewicz has been my accountability buddy for over 20 years. We communicate daily, help each other plan out our projects, and cheer each other along the way. She has been indispensable to me, and I leaned on her even more over the course of the recent pandemic, which threw my normal work systems into disarray. On this project, Margaret also introduced me to a writing group, who ensured that I kept a regular schedule of writing during the last two drafts of the report. For their steadfastness and encouragement, I thank Kirstin Ellsworth, Mette Harder, and Marie Stango.

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(born 1933), grew up in the immigrant neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Their memories were my first exposure to the realities of urban poverty, exacerbated by the depression. Three of the four of them were gone by the time I began this project, but my mother has followed my research with great interest. We spent two years' worth of car trips together listening to audiobooks about Eleanor Roosevelt, and these in turn inspired my mother to tell me things about her childhood she had never shared before. I thank her for trusting me enough to pass along these memories and for helping me to understand the impact the Roosevelts' leadership had on regular people in this country. These conversations with my mom, who turns 90 this year, are a gift I will treasure long after I have submitted this report.

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