

Eleanor Roosevelt

Eleanor Roosevelt
National Historic Site
New York

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Courtesy FDR Library

“First Lady of the World”

A few days after Franklin D. Roosevelt died in April 1945 a reporter hailed his widow outside her home and asked for a statement. “The story is over,” she replied. True, Eleanor Roosevelt’s many years as the most influential First Lady ended suddenly with the death of her husband, but her own story continued for nearly two more decades. Vigorously promoting the humanitarian causes so close to her heart, this unassuming woman earned the title—in the words of President Harry S. Truman—“First Lady of the World.”

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was born October 11, 1884, to Elliott and Anna Hall Roosevelt, wealthy New Yorkers. Her early memories were not all happy ones: “I was a shy, solemn child,” she recalled in her first autobiography. Both her parents died by the time she was 10, and Eleanor lived with her mother’s family. Left alone much of the time, she spent long hours reading but acknowledged “my real education did not begin until I went abroad at fifteen.” At the Allenswood school in England, headmistress Marie Souvestre saw great potential in the timid but intelligent teenager and cultivated in Eleanor a concern for the oppressed that eventually became her trademark.

Her academic training complete in 1902, Eleanor returned to New York and busied herself working with the city’s poor immigrants. She also began seeing her handsome distant cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt; before long the two were engaged. On St. Patrick’s Day in 1905, with scores of distinguished guests looking on, Eleanor was given in marriage by her “Uncle Ted”—President Theodore Roosevelt. Since her upbringing taught her to act as a proper society wife, Eleanor tended to the household and five children while her husband embarked on a political career.

In 1921 their lives were altered irrevocably. While vacationing at their summer home Franklin contracted a near-fatal case of polio. When the worst was over, Franklin fought to regain the use of his legs, but his physical activity thereafter was extremely limited. Franklin’s political mentor Louis Howe prodded Eleanor, always painfully shy in public, to become vocal in the Democratic party so the name Roosevelt would not be forgotten. She dutifully made speeches and official appearances, and discovered that she had a talent—and a liking—for politics. By the mid-1920s, the Victorian matron who once opposed women’s suffrage was working enthusiastically for women’s rights and other progressive causes.

Eleanor was an old hand at politics by the time Franklin was elected president in 1932. She realized that as a president’s wife she was expected to deal exclusively with social activities, but she aimed to be more useful. The “New Deal” program for coping with the disastrous effects of



An 1890s portrait shows Eleanor (second from right), her father, and brothers Hall (left) and Elliott.

the Great Depression offered opportunities for her at the forefront of the Roosevelt Administration. Franklin depended on Eleanor to gather first-hand knowledge since he could not. Besides bringing him vivid descriptions of the country’s plight, she urged swift action to change conditions she considered intolerable. Eleanor toured the country extensively, observing poverty-stricken rural areas, city slums, prisons, and even the inside of coal mines. Then came World War II and Eleanor took off overseas to visit wounded American servicemen in England, the Caribbean and the South Pacific, where one amazed observer noted, “She went into every ward, stopped at every bed, spoke to every patient.” Her contribution to the Roosevelt era is immeasurable. She believed that “sometimes I acted as a spur, even though the spurring was not always wanted.”

After Franklin’s death, Eleanor looked forward to a quiet retirement at Val-Kill Cottage where she planned to devote time to her large family. In 1946, however, President Truman called her back into public life as a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly. After resigning in 1952, she resumed her career as a world traveler—begun during the war—acting as a “good will ambassador.” Considered the elder stateswoman of the Democratic party, she worked in the 1956 and 1960 presidential campaigns. And she still found time to continue her “My Day” column which she started in the 1930s, lecture at Brandeis University, host a television talk show, write books, and participate in numerous human rights organizations. She did not slow down until a bone marrow disease made her too ill to run at her old pace. Her death on November 7, 1962, ended her fight to improve the lot of



Franklin and Eleanor greet well-wishers as they return to the White House in January 1941.

all mankind. “About the only value the story of my life may have,” Eleanor once wrote, “is to show that one can, even without any particular gifts, overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable if one is willing to face the fact that they must be overcome.” Her claim was all too modest. Had she not possessed “particular gifts,” Eleanor Roosevelt’s story would not have been the story of a great American.



Eleanor spends a late summer evening reading on her porch at Val-Kill in September, 1962.



As chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, Eleanor Roosevelt oversaw the writing and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, considered by many to be her most important achievement.

United Nations Courtesy FDR Library

The Val-Kill Years



Stone Cottage



Val-Kill Cottage



Dr. A. David Gurewitsch

Craftsmen's Workshop, Country Retreat

"The greatest thing I have learned is how good it is to come home again," Eleanor Roosevelt once told a friend. This simple statement expresses her love for the modest house near the Hudson River she called Val-Kill, the only home that was ever hers. Having spent most of her girlhood in her grandmother's mansion at Tivoli, New York, Eleanor married at age 20 and discovered that along with her husband came his doting mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt. The grande dame of Hyde Park accompanied the young couple most everywhere they went during their first years of marriage—a New York City townhouse she built and decorated for them; the family vacation house at Campobello, New Brunswick; and the venerable Roosevelt manor house on the banks of the Hudson. Sara expected to have the last word in household matters, so the young wife, wanting to please her husband's family, usually allowed her mother-in-law to rule.

Franklin's election to the New York State Senate in 1910 and his appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1913 took them to new places. Sara spent little time with her son in Albany and Washington since she disapproved of his public career. Eleanor now found her house full of Franklin's political cronies. Eventually, through her work in the Democratic party, Eleanor began to acquire political associates of her own. New York Democratic Committee co-workers Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman became her closest friends.

The idea for Val-Kill emerged in August 1924. Eleanor invited Nan and Marion to join her family at their favorite picnic spot by a stream, Fall Kill, on the Roosevelt estate. Listening to his wife's lament that Sara was closing the big house for the year, making this the last outing of the season, Franklin suggested that the three friends build a cottage nearby where they could enjoy the place year-round. The women enthusiastically accepted his offer of several acres of land for their lifetime use. Franklin himself helped architect Henry Toombs design the structure in Dutch Colonial style. By 1925 a small fieldstone house stood on the site, christened Val-Kill after the nearby stream.

Nan and Marion moved into the cottage immediately, making it their permanent residence until 1947. Eleanor joined them on weekends and holidays and during the summer. Here at last was a place she did not have to solicit her mother-in-law's permission to bring friends—and where she could be alone if she chose. In 1926 the women constructed a second, larger building on the site to house Val-Kill Industries, an experimental business they started with mutual friend Caroline O'Day. The four women were saddened by the exodus of rural New Yorkers to the large cities in search of jobs. The industry's founders believed that if these farmworkers learned manufacturing skills in addition to agriculture, they would have a source of income when farming was unprofitable. For 10 years local men and women turned out replicas of Early American furniture, pewter pieces, and weavings.



Nan, Marion, and Eleanor leave Val-Kill for Campobello in the late 1920s.

Although Val-Kill's products were of high quality, the operation folded in 1936 like so many other victims of the Great Depression.

Instead of closing down the factory building, Eleanor, by now First Lady, converted it into two apartments for herself and her secretary Malvina "Tommy" Thompson, with several guest rooms to handle the overflow from the big house. During the hectic Roosevelt presidential years, Hyde Park was a welcome refuge for Franklin from unceasing activity in Washington, as well as a quiet place for Eleanor to rest after her whirlwind trips around the country. When Franklin could not accompany her to Hyde Park, Eleanor spent her visits at Val-Kill rather than in the imposing mansion. "My house seems nicer than ever and I could be happy in it alone!" she wrote her daughter Anna. "That's the last test of one's surroundings."



While grandson Curtis pours the wine, Eleanor dishes up a Christmas feast.

Foreign heads of state who visited the president usually spent time at Hyde Park. After visiting the Roosevelt home, dignitaries such as Winston Churchill and Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands dined beside the outdoor fireplace at Val-Kill. Eleanor continued this tradition of informal gatherings outside her cottage long after Franklin died. As specified by his will, she turned the big house over to the U.S. Government but kept the Val-Kill complex for herself, living in the converted furni-

ture factory, which she renamed Val-Kill Cottage, for 17 more years.

In this placid setting she received some of the most important world leaders of the time. Nikita Khrushchev, Marshal Tito, Haile Selassie, and Jawaharlal Nehru all came to Hyde Park to see Franklin Roosevelt's grave and pay their respects to his widow. To Eleanor, these visits were opportunities for her to discuss humanitarian issues candidly with influential men. She was also hostess to Adlai Stevenson, a frequent visitor, labor leader Walter Reuther, and John F. Kennedy, who sought her blessings for his 1960 presidential campaign. There were other guests who were less famous but no less welcome. Each summer she entertained more than 150 youngsters from the local Wiltwyck School for delinquent boys. She put on an all-American pic-



Eleanor reads to young Wiltwyck boys during their annual summer picnic at Val-Kill.

nic. The children ate hot dogs and played games, and afterwards Eleanor read to them from Kipling. Eleanor's family and personal friends often stayed at Val-Kill; she delighted in planning large holiday celebrations for loved ones. Despite the steady procession of family and guests, Val-Kill was most important as this great woman's sanctuary. It was the one place where she could relax or work uninterrupted late into the night.

After Eleanor died in 1962, her house was made over into four rental units. In 1970 the property was sold to private developers who planned to build on the land. Worried that the development would damage a valuable historic asset, concerned citizens organized a drive to preserve the site, which in turn sparked interest in establishing a national memorial. In May 1977 President Jimmy Carter signed the bill creating the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, "in order to commemorate for the education, inspiration, and benefit of present and future generations the life and work of an outstanding woman in American history."

About Your Visit

Visitors to Val-Kill are invited to view the film biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. Val-Kill Cottage, the Depression-era workshop and Eleanor's home from 1945 to 1962, is open to visitors, as is the Stone Cottage (if not in other use), the original residence on the site.

A tour of the grounds includes the outbuildings, the flower gardens, the swimming pool, and Val-Kill Pond; refer to the map at right for locations. Visitors are also invited to walk the trails that meander through the site's wooded areas. *Caution: Please be sure to stay on the trails to avoid poison ivy.*

Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For information about visiting hours and to arrange group tours, write to the Superintendent, Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Sites, 519 Albany Post Road, Hyde Park, NY 12538-1997, or call 914-229-9115.

