12. Franklin D. Roosevelt, New Yorker: The New Deal in the Empire State

During Franklin D. Roosevelt’s governorship, his home state of New York served as a laboratory for New Deal programs. In turn, after FDR won the presidency, the New Deal in all its variety transformed and enriched New York in ways that remain very much visible in the twenty-first century.

As New York’s governor from 1929 until his election to the presidency in 1932, FDR pioneered state old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and aid for the ever-growing ranks of the unemployed; all became central components of the New Deal. His battle to regulate private utility companies, commitment to hydroelectric power, and determination to expand access to affordable electricity set the stage for the Tennessee Valley Authority. FDR’s struggle in New York State to “help the farm dollar go as far as the [city dollar]” helped shape New Deal farm policy and work-relief projects. And his experience with New York’s failing banks helped prepare him to manage the nation’s banking crisis and push reforms such as the establishment of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The New Deal policies tested in New York went on to profoundly influence its future. Upstate rural communities benefited from New Deal farm policy and the Civil Conservation Corps’s programs to protect natural resources. Meanwhile, New York City’s ethnic neighborhoods experienced (many for the first time) American theater and music performed in their own languages. Public-works and work-relief projects dramatically marked New York State, studding countryside and city alike with schools, post offices, parks, roads, bridges, and tunnels.

New York was also a training ground for New Dealers. The energetic, avid New Yorkers FDR selected to design and implement these programs —most notably Harry Hopkins and Frances Perkins —would shape the New Deal’s most lasting legacies: Social Security, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the massive campaign to modernize and repair the nation’s infrastructure.
From the fall of 1933 through June 1934, thousands of previously unemployed men flooded New York City parks to refurbish their grounds. Working around the clock in three shifts, these new Civilian Works Administration (CWA) employees labored through sleet, snow, and bitter cold to dig and pave walkways, plant new trees and shrubs, and build and install park benches.

In 1935 gleaming new structures built by the New Deal’s biggest jobs-relief program, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), further transformed and revitalized city parks. Eleven large pools opened one after another across the five boroughs in the summer of 1936, each displaying bold innovation in size and design. The McCarren Pool in Williamsburg (Brooklyn), for example, could accommodate 6,800 swimmers, and the 330-foot-long Astoria Pool in Queens proudly hosted the Olympic swimming and diving trials in 1936 and again in 1964. When the Red Hook Pool opened in western Brooklyn, more than forty thousand New Yorkers attended its dedication ceremonies, cheering their delight at both a place to cool off on hot city days and a sign of exuberant life in the midst of the Depression.

WPA workers also built 255 new playgrounds and a golf course in Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx, rebuilt the Central Park Zoo, redesigned and rebuilt Bryant Park in Midtown Manhattan, and significantly upgraded sections of both Central Park and Brooklyn’s Prospect Park. They even created new public beaches—at Jacob Riis Park in Rockaway, Queens, for example, where workers also erected a simple but elegant new bathing pavilion and boardwalk. To complement these facilities, WPA workers taught many city dwellers to swim.

Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia reveled in the New Deal’s commitment to restoring New York using local people’s labor. Their work, he proclaimed, stood as “a monument to the progressive government which would not and could not see unemployed men on the breadline.”

Top: The McCarren Park Pool in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, July 1944. One of eleven pools built across New York City by the Works Progress Administration and opened in 1936, McCarren was designed to accommodate 6,800 swimmers. It closed in 1984 but was rehabilitated and reopened to swimmers in 2012. NYC Municipal Archives

Bottom, left: An entrance to the Central Park Zoo, September 1942. LOC

Bottom, right: Visitors in front of the Central Park Zoo restaurant, September 1942. In the 1930s, Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers had refurbished the zoo, along with a host of other New York City parks and cultural and infrastructural landmarks. An astounding one in seven WPA dollars was spent in the city, with famed New York City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses marshaling the federal dollars to tremendous effect. LOC
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum

No president before Franklin D. Roosevelt created a presidential library to house his papers. No president after him has failed to do so.

In 1937, as FDR contemplated life after the White House, he decided to donate all his papers and immense private collections to the federal government. He would furthermore build a library for the collection on his sylvan estate in Hyde Park, New York, and give the building and the land it occupied to the National Archives, which had been created in 1934 to preserve the nation’s history. The Archives would manage the library and museum attached to it.

This decision changed the course of history. Before FDR’s act of uncommon generosity and foresight, presidents’ papers were their personal property and could be preserved or destroyed as each saw fit. Many were lost to decay, carelessness, or deliberate destruction. Following FDR’s precedent, the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 established a system of presidential libraries built with privately raised funds but transferred to the federal government, and the Presidential Records Act of 1978 made presidential records public property. As archivist Robert O’Connor has proclaimed, “Franklin D. Roosevelt is the nation’s answer to a historian’s prayer.”

FDR was criticized as egotistical for his library plan. But as an enthusiastic amateur historian, he understood the value to scholars of a single repository for all his voluminous correspondence and other records. In addition, FDR was an avid collector. His personal collection, which included such items as stamps, naval art, and ship models, was far too large for any one museum to house, yet he did not want it divided. He also hoped that Eleanor Roosevelt would add her massive archive to the library, so he sketched two additional wings for the library, where ER’s papers were indeed deposited after her death in 1962.

FDR saw the library’s establishment as a challenge to those who would follow him in the Oval Office, and, characteristically for the president who had led the country through some of its most difficult years, as an act of faith.

“To bring together the records of the past,” FDR said at the library’s dedication on June 30, 1941, “and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.”
Roosevelt House: 47–49 East 65th Street, New York City

The Christmas after Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt married in 1905, FDR’s mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, gave them a surprise present—a sketch of the New York City townhouse she would build for them at 49 East 65th Street, adjoining the townhome she would have built for herself. The four-story Neo-Georgian house of brick and limestone would be the Roosevelts’ New York City residence until Sara’s death in June 1941.

Although FDR considered Springwood, the Roosevelt family estate in Hyde Park, New York, to be his true home, the Roosevelts’ city house became increasingly important to both his career and ER’s political development. It is where FDR began his rehabilitation after being struck with polio in 1921; where he conferred with state party leaders, elected officials, and others whose support he needed to stage a return to politics; where he addressed the nation the day after being elected president of the United States; and where he conferred with his “Brain Trust” circle of academic policy advisors and interviewed potential cabinet secretaries.

When Sara died in 1941, FDR and ER put the double townhouse up for sale. In 1943 FDR sold it (at a greatly discounted price) to a nonprofit group representing the students of Hunter College. When Hunter announced that it intended to name the building for FDR’s mother and use it as one of the nation’s first student centers dedicated to interfaith and interracial understanding, FDR donated $1,000 to found a library at the Sara Delano Roosevelt Memorial House. Students occupied the house until 1992, when Roosevelt House was closed for long-needed repairs.

In 2010 Hunter College christened the fully restored double townhouse as the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute. Today the institute encourages student examination of contemporary public policy and human rights challenges, fosters community conversation on pressing issues of the day, and supports faculty research.
Building the Five Boroughs: the Works Progress Administration and Public Works Administration in New York City

No city showcases the achievements of New Deal construction more than New York. One in seven dollars spent by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the New Deal’s biggest work-relief effort, went to Gotham. The program hired seven hundred thousand jobless New Yorkers, whose labor transformed the city’s physical landscape. Meanwhile, the Public Works Administration (PWA), which hired any qualified construction worker and concentrated on large-scale construction, built some of its most monumental infrastructure projects in New York City, helping to connect the five boroughs.

New Deal workers erected the Queensborough Bridge that spans the East River and links Queens, Roosevelt Island, and Manhattan. They built roads, bridges, and tunnels that city dwellers use today: Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive, Belt Parkway, and Queens Boulevard; the Triborough Bridge (renamed the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge in 2008); and the Queens-Midtown and Lincoln tunnels connecting Manhattan to Queens and New Jersey. WPA crews built New York City’s first commercial airport, LaGuardia; dedicated in 1939, it remains one of the busiest airports in the world. WPA teams also upgraded the city’s power plants, garbage incinerators, and sewage systems. They even prepared overgrown land in Flushing Meadows, Queens, to serve as the site of the glittering 1939 World’s Fair, meant to explore the future of technology under the slogan “Dawn of a New Day.” FDR gave the opening address.

New Deal builders gave the city new schools, post offices, municipal markets, hospitals, community health centers, tuberculosis testing sites, jails, and courthouses, as well as new buildings for three of the city’s public institutions of higher learning: Hunter College, City College, and Brooklyn College.

WPA financial support allowed the city to build First Houses, the first federally financed public housing project in the nation, on an East Village site that had been covered with dilapidated tenements. First Houses continues as home to public housing tenants today. So do Harlem River Houses in Upper Manhattan and Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, built by the PWA.

Not only did a significant number of New Yorkers find the work they desperately needed in New Deal–financed construction jobs, the work they performed meaningfully enhanced daily life in the city for generations to come—with sturdy, well-designed facilities for transportation, education, sanitation, housing, recreation, and the arts.
Decorating the City: The Federal Art Project

During the Great Depression, more artists lived in New York City than in any other part of the nation. The vast majority had little or no work. Thus, when the Federal Art Project (FAP) announced it would hire unemployed artists to paint, sculpt, design posters, make models, create mosaics, take photographs, and produce lithographs, the New York unit was flooded with applications.

Part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the FAP sent artists to paint brilliantly colored murals on the walls of dozens of public schools, including Maxwell Starr’s History of Mankind in Terms of Mental and Physical Labor, which still adorns the main lobby of Brooklyn Technical High School; Orlando Mario Ricci’s Famous Libraries of the World in the reading room of the Brooklyn College Library; and Ernest Fiene’s pro-union History of the Needlecraft Industry at the High School of Fashion (formerly the Central High School of Needle Trades) in Chelsea. The New Deal’s Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture sponsored the renowned painter Ben Shahn’s creation of a mural celebrating American civil liberties—The Four Freedoms—still on view at the Woodhaven post office in Queens. The Bronx Central Annex of the U.S. Post Office proudly hosted Shahn’s thirteen-panel Resources of America featuring heroically styled workers, from farmhands to builders. Preservationists launched a campaign to save the Shahn mural after the post office announced in 2013 it would sell the building, and in December 2013 the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated the mural an interior landmark. Another New Deal program, the Treasury Relief Art Project, sent Reginald Marsh to paint eight scenes of the New York Harbor for the majestic rotunda of the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House (now the National Museum of the American Indian). Other spectacular murals animated the walls of courthouses, hospitals, settlement houses, libraries, post offices, and even the penitentiary on Rikers Island and the Women’s House of Detention in Greenwich Village.

New York also benefited from the WPA art created by soon-to-be-legendary local painters, such as Mark Rothko, Raphael Soyer, Stuart Davis, and Jackson Pollock. Supported by the arts project, Berenice Abbott walked the streets of Depression-era New York taking thousands of black-and-white photographs that chronicled the juxtaposition of an emerging modernity—including New Deal construction—with sometimes decaying nineteenth-century streetscapes. The images were collected in her celebrated book Changing New York.

Other, lesser-known artists taught free classes to children and adults in new community art centers and schools, showed their work at the WPA Gallery at 225 West 57th Street, and designed posters urging New Yorkers to pay attention to their health, visit the zoo, and take advantage of New Deal programs.

Franklin D. Roosevelt celebrated this work. As he told those attending the 1939 dedication of a new wing of the Museum of Modern Art: “Art in America has always belonged to the people and has never been the property of an academy or a class. . . . I think the WPA artist exemplifies with great force the essential place that the arts have in a democratic society such as ours.”

A 160-square-foot mural, The Story of Richmond Hill, at the Richmond Hill Library in Queens, New York. Created by the artist Philip Evergood and completed in 1936, the lively, colorful mural telling the story of this south-central Queens neighborhood is one of many that still adorn the public buildings of New York in the twenty-first century. LOC

A poster announcing a New York City exhibit featuring work by children in classes given by the Federal Art Project (FAP). No city benefited more than New York from the FAP, which hired artists to lavish murals and other art works on its public schools, post offices, and other public buildings. LOC
The 1939 World’s Fair

On April 30, 1939, as Adolf Hitler’s forces marched through Europe, the World’s Fair opened in Queens. Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers had transformed the damp wasteland of Flushing Meadows into a sleek, dynamic exposition on how best to build “the World of Tomorrow.”

Visitors were treated to exhibits and pavilions extolling how technology and manufacturing would restore economic prosperity and protect democracy. Cheap, durable consumer goods would not only help “average” Americans (a concept introduced by fair marketers) live a better life but also give them the “free” time civic engagement demanded.

The Perisphere pavilion introduced visitors to “Democracy,” a planned community where wide roads linked a modern, urban commercial center to family-centered suburbs. Visitors to “Futurama”—part ride, part exhibit—sat in comfortable armchairs that carried them over a thirty-six-thousand-square-foot model of an imagined 1960 American landscape connected by a national highways system that would promote economic and cultural progress.

The fair also offered exciting entertainment. Synchronized swimmers performed in the nation’s largest amphitheater. The Industry pavilion offered a thrilling exhibition of FM radio and the revolutionary new entertainment device, television. Enthralled by the small screen, visitors saw Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, a master at radio, perform just as compellingly on television.

However, visitors’ reactions to the fair were not unmixed. They embraced the technology and certainly longed for economic recovery, but remained wary of an uncertain future.
Top Cottage

In 1937, as Franklin D. Roosevelt began to contemplate life after the White House, he purchased 118 acres adjacent to his family estate at Hyde Park, New York, including what his cousin Margaret Suckley described as “the nicest Hill in Dutchess County.” He looked forward to building his own retreat there, a place where he could write his memoirs and relax at some remove from “the mob” he anticipated would visit his library and museum.

The following year, he began to sketch plans for a stone cottage atop the hill that would both accommodate his wheelchair and mirror the Dutch Colonial style prevalent throughout the Roosevelt estate. He envisioned living on one floor, with windowsills, counters, and cabinet tops low enough for him to reach from his wheelchair. The cottage doors would be widened and thresholds eliminated to facilitate smooth movement from one room to another, and two sweeping glass doors would open onto a wide back porch, perfect for picnics, cocktails, or private conversation.

In 1938 FDR asked architect Henry Toombs, who had helped design Eleanor Roosevelt’s nearby Val-Kill cottage, to flesh out his design. Toombs did so but argued that FDR should be listed as Top Cottage’s architect of record.

FDR loved Top Cottage and used it as soon as it was completed in 1939. Indeed, that year he showed off his small retreat to a visiting King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, treating the English monarchs to a traditional American picnic—hot dogs and all. After 1940, when voters reelected FDR to an unprecedented third term, Top Cottage became a secure place to discuss war-related issues with aides and foreign leaders. The president grew so at ease in his hilltop sanctuary that he even allowed Suckley to photograph him there sitting in his wheelchair, something he normally avoided.

After FDR’s death, his son Elliott Roosevelt sold Top Cottage to a Hyde Park family that, in 1996, sold it to the Open Space Institute (OSI). OSI leased the property to the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, which began restoring Top Cottage to reflect FDR’s original designs and its use during his residency. In 2001, OSI turned Top Cottage over to the National Park Service. It became part of the Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site.

Top Cottage joins Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello as one of only two homes designed by a president. But it stands alone as a pioneering example of accessible architecture designed by a world leader for his own use.
Val-Kill Cottage Industries

In 1925, with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s strong encouragement, Eleanor Roosevelt and her two dear friends Marion Dickerman and Nancy Cook built a two-story fieldstone house—aptly named Stone Cottage—about two miles east of Springwood, the Roosevelt family home in Hyde Park, New York. FDR, who found the women good company, smart, and politically useful, gave them a ninety-nine-year lease on the 180-acre tract. Cook, a master woodworker, made the furniture for the cottage. They called their retreat Val-Kill.

In 1926 the three women decided to launch Val-Kill Industries, as ER recalled, “primarily to carry out a theory” she and FDR shared “about establishing industries in agricultural counties to give men and boys a means of earning money in winter” and having “something interesting to do.”

They erected a larger building near Stone Cottage to house the operation, and in 1927 Val-Kill Industries began selling colonial-style furniture reproductions made by Hyde Park workers and designed by Cook. Later they would expand the business to include pewter dining and desk items (Val-Kill Forge) and woolen weavings. ER, who had the largest investment, promoted the furniture by holding showings at her New York City and Hyde Park homes, mentioning Val-Kill Industries in articles, and even making department store appearances.

While the project was never a financial success, ER continued to support it after FDR was elected governor and then president. In 1937 the women dissolved their partnership and closed the factory. ER then had the factory building remodeled and converted into apartments for herself and guests. She loved Val-Kill, often telling friends it was there she first experienced having a real home of her own.

In 1977 President Jimmy Carter had both buildings designated the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site. Today Stone Cottage houses the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill, which offers leadership training for teenage girls.