

# Eleanor Roosevelt

1884-1962

Eleanor Roosevelt played many roles in her life: wife, mother, grandmother, teacher, First Lady, political activist, community volunteer, diplomat, public speaker and journalist.

Mrs. Roosevelt reached beyond her social class to champion the rights of women, children, minorities, workers and the poor. From her earliest work in the New York City settlement house movement in the 1920s to her chairmanship of President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women in the 1960s, she was a tireless fighter for those whose voices were weak.



David Gurewitsch photo

Except for her years in Washington, D.C. as the wife of Assistant Secretary of the Navy and then President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and her boarding school in England, Mrs. Roosevelt lived in New York State. The Hudson Valley “played a major role in molding the character of a woman whose life is legend...The Hudson Valley was where Eleanor Roosevelt grew up, married and retired.”<sup>1</sup>

She was born in New York City, but after her mother's untimely death and her father's alcoholism, she came to Dutchess County to live with her grandmother Hall in Tivoli. After she married her cousin Franklin, the young couple kept homes in Manhattan and at his mother's home in Hyde Park. They also lived in Albany for the years he was Governor.

After Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945, Mrs. Roosevelt moved into an apartment at Val-Kill in Hyde Park, a few miles away from the Roosevelt home, which had been turned into a national park. She always felt that Val-Kill was the only home of her own that she ever had. Her apartments in New York were owned and furnished by her mother-in-law.

She would often be seen by neighbors riding her horse, walking or driving around Hyde Park. At Val-Kill she entertained people her mother-in-law would have looked down upon: labor union leaders, juvenile delinquents, women politicians, foreign diplomats, and students from the United States and abroad.

She used her daily column “My Day”, many articles in magazines, and public speeches to convey her thoughts, ideas and observations. In 1928 she wrote an article in Redbook magazine “Women Must Learn to Play the Game as Men Do”, a response to what she saw as women's passivity and ineffectiveness in the political arena.

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<sup>1</sup> Images of America: Eleanor Roosevelt, A Hudson Valley Remembrance” by Joyce Ghee and Joan Spence. Arcadia Press, 2005. page 7.

In whatever position she held, she encouraged the appointment of women to high offices, insisted that only women reporters cover her in the White House and pushed women to run for elective office.

Although Mrs. Roosevelt never attended college, a fact she regretted all her life, she learned from all of her experiences and the people around her. She taught at a variety of schools: the Todhunter School in New York City, Barnard College, Brandeis University, and at labor schools for women workers. She was a much sought after commencement speaker and lecturer at colleges and schools all over the country, but had a special place for those in the Hudson Valley.

She believed in the importance of explaining ideas so that ordinary people could participate in discovering them and then use the political process to forward their goals.<sup>2</sup>

The organizations that most shaped Mrs. Roosevelt and to which she devoted much of her efforts were the League of Women Voters, the Women's Trade Union League, the Democratic Party, especially its women's divisions which she supported, the United Nations and the American Association for the UN, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

One of her proudest accomplishments was the ratification of the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Poughkeepsie Branch  
Eleanor Charwat, researcher and writer

Other references:

Cook, Blanche Wiesen, Eleanor Roosevelt, volume 1 1884-1933. Viking Press, 2005.  
Gurewitsch, A. David, M.D., Eleanor Roosevelt, Her Day. Interchange Foundation, 1973.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 58.