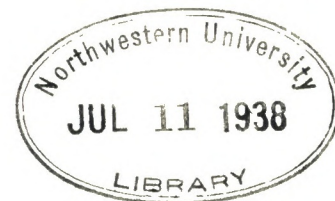


THE WORKS PROGRAM

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--Works Progress Administration--



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PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT'S FOREBEARS PIONEERED FOR WORK RELIEF BEFORE
THE CIVIL WAR

More than 80 years ago, before the Civil War and long before the New Deal, forebears of President Franklin D. Roosevelt were pioneers in the effort in New York City to displace local charity in the form of the dole with work relief.

The discovery of this historical, family background to the philosophy of the President's relief policy, was made by researchers in the WPA Historical Records Survey, who are themselves receiving federal work relief in New York City. Announcement of the find was made today by Harry L. Hopkins, Works Progress Administrator.

Their researches have disclosed that in 1851, Mrs. James John Roosevelt, with sixty-four other "eminent ladies of society and wealth", petitioned the New York Common Council to aid unemployed seamstresses of the period through the establishment of "a Female House of Industry". The original petition, bearing Mrs. Roosevelt's signature, was found by the WPA workers in the barred and guarded official files of Manhattan's Municipal Building.

Arguing the demoralizing effects of charity relief, the petition says, in part: "The House of Industry proposes to furnish through the

whole year employment to those who cannot go to service or obtain work from the various tradesmen and also to provide for that numerous class of young girls who now support themselves by begging, sweeping the streets, etc., and who from idleness too frequently fall into vice. By clothing them, instructing them in sewing, and giving them habits of Industry, it is hoped they will be preserved from their ruin and become respectable members of society."

The utter inadequacy of relief measures in 1851 is revealed in the following paragraphs: "During the winter a large proportion have been supported by obtaining employment from societies formed by the benevolent ladies belonging to the different churches in this city. The Widow society has also administered liberally to the necessities of many, and with the aid of other Charitable Institutions, they have been hitherto preserved from suffering.

"For the ensuing eight months all assistance from Charitable Societies is withdrawn, employment for the poor sewing woman has ceased, and already has the cry of distress been sent from many a house and its once industrious inhabitants compelled to beg from door to door, that work which is to enable them to retain a shelter for their families and preserve them from starvation. The few who are successful in obtaining by this means a temporary relief, must eventually suffer during the summer, when the many who lend a ready ear to the tale of distress, comfort with their sympathy and relieve with a bountiful hand, have in common with the thoughtless and the gay, fled from the city in search of pleasure or of health and left it to the poor, who are compelled, unfriended and alone, to face both Poverty and Pestilence."

The petition concludes: "In furnishing the means of an honest livelihood and destroying the pretexts for mendicity, this Institution will greatly decrease the claims on Public Charity, which encourages your petitioners to hope, that when their views are understood, and the good they hope to effect is duly considered, their Petition will be favorably received by the Common Council, from whom they now most respectfully solicit aid, and a building in which they may immediately commence their Charitable labours."

But Mrs. Roosevelt was ahead of her time. After much delay, the Common Council shelved the petition, yielding to the argument that such social "spending" was not justified.

James John Roosevelt, the husband, gave encouragement and sympathy to his wife's social labors. He was a merchant-barrister, became an outstanding figure in law and politics, campaigned for Andrew Jackson and aligned himself with the Democratic party. He was a direct descendant of Nicholas Von Rosenvelt, the Hollander whose family tree bore two presidents of the United States: Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

James John Roosevelt married Cornelia Van Ness in Paris in 1831 in the presence of General Lafayette. From childhood, according to a rare old volume entitled "Queens of American Society," she was a brilliant figure in the social life of Washington, New York and the Continent. Her time was "not altogether given up to fashionable gayeties"; she was "continually occupied with some good work," she "always thought of the suffering ones."

A pencilled footnote in the archives of the Roosevelt Historical Library, where the book now is, gives the motto of the family as:

"That which we plant, we shall care for."

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