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2012
SUBSISTENCE HOMESTEADS IN JEFFERSON COUNTY: A SUCCESSFUL “EXPERIMENT”? 

SUSAN ELIZABETH (BETH) HUNTER

HISTORY

ABSTRACT

This work focuses on the history of subsistence homesteads built by the federal government in the 1930s. The homesteads were routinely referred to as “experiments.” It is the intention of this author to examine the Jefferson County homesteads as successful or unsuccessful homesteads. Current research on this topic is sparse. The research contained in this thesis rests mainly on primary sources and focuses on the construction of the homes and the economic and social issues surrounding the homesteads. A brief synopsis of the condition of each of the Alabama homesteads is also included.

This subsistence homestead program emerged from the “back-to-the-earth” and “back-to-the-farm” movements popularized in the first half of the twentieth century. The movement resulted from the devastating effects of the Great Depression. The basic goal of the subsistence homesteads was to provide shelter and employment for the nation’s most destitute areas while subsidizing income with farming or gardening. The South proved to be instrumental in the success of the subsistence homestead projects. As the federal government aided relief to the South, a series of social and economic experiments occurred. The subsistence homesteads were a small part of the New Deal experiments, but it is the objective of this thesis to prove the Jefferson County homesteads were successful nonetheless.
Keywords: subsistence homestead, Palmerdale, Greenwood, Mt. Olive, Cahaba, farm
DEDICATION

I enjoy the thought of time-travel. If, years ago, someone were to have told me I would write a thesis on Alabama subsistence communities in the 1930s, I would not have believed them. Yet, the subject has now become a part of my life and identity as a historian. In researching this topic, my family took the word “experiment” to heart. In an effort to learn as much as possible about this time period, we sent soil samples to the agricultural college, planted gardens, took food preservation classes, and I learned to sew. My husband, Russell, is a great listener and my “voice of reason.” I would not have been able to study, write, and research without his help. My children, Barrett, Brennan, and Kirk remind me that I am not just a student, but their mom as well. A wonderful source of joy, my children have given me the opportunity to stay young while immersed in decades-old primary documents.

My friends, professors, and classmates at UAB not only challenged my thoughts about history, but also about the world. I am deeply indebted to all of them in various ways; however, three stand out as debts I can never repay. Ms. Pam King and Ms. Kaye Nail not only guided me in my academic pursuits and goals, they are my biggest cheerleaders and friends. Finally, I must thank Professor Andre Millard. His encouragement and support knew no bounds. I am eternally grateful to have studied under such a gifted historian.
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This thesis research would not have been possible without the help of local historians. I must first thank the Gardendale Historical Society for piquing my interest on the topic of rammed earth houses and the Mt. Olive homestead. Ms. Linda Nelson, Ms. Marjorie L. White, Dr. Leah Rawls Atkins, Dr. Harriet Amos Doss, and Mr. Bill Tharpe not only shared their research with me; they mentored me at conferences, papers, and in my history career. I am fortunate to have communicated with such local history superstars. Also, the librarians at both the Birmingham Public Library and UAB’s Sterne Library were incredible resources for hard-to-find materials.

My research areas were deeply enriched with a visit to the Cumberland Mountain Homestead in Tennessee. Ms. Vicki Vaden served as my personal tour guide for two days. Also, the research communication of Jennifer Lynn Carpenter from the University of Maryland, College Park, proved helpful and inspiring.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow students and professors, especially my thesis committee and its chair, Dr. Robert Corley, as they have encouraged me and directed my paths in both this thesis and in the broad scope of future research.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO SUBSISTENCE HOMESTEAD PROGRAM

The history of the subsistence homesteads is one of government planned and built homes and the families who inhabited them. The program emerged from the “back-to-the-earth” and “back-to-the-farm” movements popular in the first half of the twentieth century. The basic goal of the subsistence homesteads was to “demonstrate the economic and social value of a form of livelihood which combines part-time work and part-time gardening or farming.”\(^1\) The South was targeted for economic help, as evidenced by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938: “It is my conviction that the South presents right now the nation’s No. 1 economic problem…It is an unbalance that can and must be righted, for the sake of the South and of the nation.”\(^2\) As the government aided relief to the South, a series of social and economic experiments were enacted. The subsistence homesteads were a small part of the New Deal experiments, but a successful one nonetheless.

This year (2012) marks the 75\(^{th}\) anniversary of several Alabama subsistence homesteads. In examining how these homesteads have fared, this thesis examines the economic and social changes, as well as the preservation of the homes and the sense of community identity. It is on these criteria that success is gauged for each of the homesteads. While the Jefferson County homesteads are the main focus of this thesis,

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other Alabama homesteads are included for comparison to support the opinion that the Jefferson County homesteads were successful experiments in the subsistence homestead program.

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The decade of the 1930s marked a pivotal point in American history. Starting with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, many Americans experienced a level of poverty worse than any other time. Countless individuals lost their savings and investments as a result of bank closures. Companies folded, leaving millions unemployed. Bread lines and soup kitchens attempted to relieve their hunger, yet employment and adequate shelter equated the same urgency. In the rural South, farmers who were still able to grow their own food fell from subsistence to near starvation.³ For the first time in modern America, families experienced severe hunger in mass numbers. To combat this situation, relief organizations and social experiments began in earnest, backed by the federal government.

An overbalance of population existed in industrial cities. More people lived in crowded urban areas than in rural.⁴ One of the chief reasons people abandoned their land was weather related. The Dust Bowl was the result of drought and developed due to weather conditions and over-farming. In the 1930s, the barren, drought-stricken farmlands proved worthless. Many had known poverty before, but this destitution was unbearable. As most famously remembered in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, families decided that change—moving away from their homes—was the only answer. Thus, the country underwent drastic migrations.

At this time in American history, relief seemed unreachable. This time period, marked by the Wall Street Crash until the start of World War II, was aptly named the Great Depression. People felt emotionally and financially depressed and it affected the nation’s economic and psychological outlook for decades. America was in serious trouble. This statement was particularly true for the South, as explained by historian Frank Freidel: “The South was so painfully in need of succor that they desperately sought federal aid; yet the New Deal inevitably threatened to upset the status quo and alter some of the cherished institutions upon which they fervently believed the very existence of Southern civilization depended.” Southern Democrats positioned themselves firmly behind presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt, but stood their distance on such topics as racial equality reforms.5

True to his campaign promise, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ushered in his plan for economic recovery, The New Deal, in the early 1930s. Not everyone welcomed this new institution of relief welfare. It appeared most, however, clung tightly to hope, filled with anticipation for any change from their present living situation. In response to the newly elected Roosevelt, one man remarked,

America hasn’t been as happy in three years as they are today, no money, no banks, no work, no nothing, but they know they got a man in there who is wise to Congress, wise to our so-called big men. The whole country is with him, just as he does something. If he burned down the capitol, we would cheer and say ‘well, we at least got a fire started anyhow.’6

This New Deal involved a variety of work programs for men and women, in an effort to stimulate the difficult economy and reduce the growing unemployment rate. Work programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Civilian Conservation

5 Freidel, 35.
Corps (CCC), Civilian Works Administration (CWA), and the Resettlement Administration (RA) provided employment, particularly construction projects, at a time when American families struggled to find jobs through the Great Depression.

One flaw of the New Deal involved the sheer number of programs, not to mention the revolving agencies and to whom each reported. Some agencies’ names changed during the course of the New Deal. Most agencies experienced several leadership changes. While some viewed the New Deal as an organized body with catchy acronyms, some politicians recognized the restructuring of responsibilities and made ambitious grabs at government leadership in Washington. With few exceptions, politicians praised Roosevelt’s ideas at every opportunity, especially in radio and newspaper interviews.7

This relief was desperately needed. By the fall of 1934, “one person in eight was being fed from a Federal dole… Many had returned to the land in search of security, but often without tools, or workstock, or even any practical knowledge of farming.” While the migration continued, Congress enacted a series of programs to provide shelter (by way of affordable government housing) and food (by way of small farms). Government leaders expected these subsistence homesteaders to pay rent while supplementing their diet with food grown from their property.8

The first Director of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, M. L. Wilson, had a strong background in farming, previously serving in the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Wilson’s ideas for this new division included work and homes for those who were not loafers, but willing to try an experiment in self-reliance. Wilson surrounded himself with advisors who had intimate knowledge of farming life. Together, these men created five

8 Wager, 1.
major classes of projects for relief: homestead gardens in both small and large industrial centers; rehabilitation of stranded groups, particularly coal miners; projects for rural areas, including the elimination of rural slums for reorganization; and projects for the migration of farm families from the West.\(^9\)

The New Dealer’s position that aid should come by way of subsistence homesteads conjured the image of the American dream of homeownership. At that time, back-to-the-land and back-to-the-farm movements of cooperation were quite idyllic and romantic.\(^{10}\) According to historian Kenneth Jackson, “Housing is an outward expression of the inner human nature.”\(^{11}\) Clearly both the emotions and basic living conditions needed lifting. With the intention of raising the quality of life for families, the government focused the New Deal energies into first putting men to work for large municipal projects. With the employment construct in place, building neighborhoods, community centers, and schools became the next priority.

The Division of Subsistence Homesteads fell under the Resettlement Administration, later named the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Rexford Tugwell, RA chief and assistant secretary of agriculture, stated, “It is a fact that we as a nation have decided to accord relief to the victims of this economic crisis.”\(^{12}\) Few areas of the country experienced more relief than Alabama. (See Appendix B)

Through the help of powerful Alabama Senator John H. Bankhead, Congress initially appropriated $25 million for subsistence homesteads as part of the National

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9 Wager 6-8.
10 Conkin, 327.
12 “FHA to War on South’s Farm Slums,” *The Birmingham News-Age-Herald*, n.d., clipping file, Department of Southern History, Birmingham Public Library.
Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. Through Bankhead’s endorsements, Alabama was chosen as one of the first areas to begin recovery. Eight subsistence homestead communities were developed in Alabama. Of these, six communities served whites, and two served the black population. For the first time, hundreds of Alabama families enjoyed home ownership.

A powerful marketing campaign began to entice target families into the homesteads. Government documents advertising the homesteads compared the cash income of two workers and their expenditures. While the homesteader paid more in transportation costs, he saved money by growing most of his own food, which allowed for larger clothing, education, medical care and general household budgets. (See Fig. 1) As a result of newspaper articles and word-of-mouth, an overwhelming response flooded the Birmingham office.

Successful candidates for homestead selection included the following criteria: (1) was not a current home owner, (2) possessed a reputation of honesty and integrity, (3) retained stable residence in the past and held the promise of continued employment, (4) constituted “a natural family group,” (5) had gardening and community interests, (6) were free from infection diseases, and (7) could be accommodated in these homestead houses. Other items not listed but judged by the local homestead offices included good health for farming, citizenship, and race. These criteria varied in several documents, but always focused on reputation, employment, and community.

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13 Wager, 4. This amount grew over time to over $100 million. (See Appendix B)
16 “A Homestead and Hope,” 11.
17 Wager, 54.
Agency efforts in Alabama, which aimed to provide clean, modern living for families within traveling distance to employment, were incredibly ambitious and ultimately successful. During the mid-1930s, the federal government built 99 homestead projects, including four in the Jefferson County area. The homestead sites, chosen for their proximity to coal mines and industrial employment, also featured flat farming land isolated from the congestion of downtown Birmingham. Each house in the Jefferson County area featured five bedrooms, a full-size kitchen, and a bathroom, providing families with a comfortable and modern living environment.

Figure 1: “Two Workers Each Have an Annual Cash Income of $800.” This illustration delineated the cost benefits of living in a homestead versus living in a city center. Source: “A Homestead and Hope,” Bulletin Number One, United States Department of the Interior Division of Subsistence homesteads, Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 11.
County homestead included land, several small out-buildings, and a neighborhood co-op program.

The main agencies involved in building transportation and constructing homesteads in Jefferson County included the CCC, CWA and WPA. Each agency worked in tandem, assisting the Resettlement Administration in building the subsistence homesteads according to the architects’ plans. Newly employed men cleared land, built roads and bridges, and dug ditches for pipe laying and soil erosion. The amount of pre-construction manpower rivaled that of the actual homebuilding stage. The scale of reconstruction across America differed from any the country had ever experienced. These new roads and bridges became the main throughways used decades later for suburban sprawl. Along with the older company towns, the homesteads became the model for the suburban neighborhood.

There had been earlier attempts at subsistence communities in the government—and in the private sector—but were ultimately not successful. What separated the New Deal subsistence homesteads was the lack of individualism. Rather than the success of the homestead riding on each individual homesteader, the 1930s homesteads originated with a plan of collectivism, in which the homesteaders worked together toward goals that would benefit the entire community. Proof of this cooperation exists today within the schools, community centers, post offices, and recreational facilities—almost all started by the homestead organizations. These subsistence homesteads were the first multi-state, federally planned communities.

18 For more information regarding the impact individualism played in the New Deal, please see Paul Keith Conkin’s book, *Tomorrow A New World: The New Deal Community Program*. 
Because of the area’s industrial makeup, many unemployed workers became federal workers as construction began. To organize the combined efforts of the various government agencies and the local workers, the Office of Birmingham Homesteads, Inc. was established in 1935. Headquartered in the Webb Crawford Building, this organization featured prominent businessmen as members of the Birmingham Subsistence Homestead Committee: industrialists Erskine Ramsay and C. F. DeBardeleben; newspaper publisher Victor H. Hanson; developer Robert Jemison, Jr.; lawyer Hugh Morrow; and Jefferson County farm agent and manager for the homesteads, J. L. Liles. Additionally, John Beecher, a descendant of the abolitionists Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, served as the community manager for the Birmingham and Walker County homesteads for the Resettlement Administration. In an article in *The Birmingham News*, Beecher discussed the work of the Resettlement Administration regarding the homesteads: “In many cases it is not so much a question of leaving deplorable housing conditions as a chance to get out of crowded urban centers, to get out where they can have adequate garden space, and a chance for the children to enjoy the advantages of country life.”

For many, the homesteads provided new homes, enough land for a garden, neighbors similar to themselves, and most of all, a chance to start fresh.

The homestead movement inspired people around the country to participate in this new economic and social experiment. Interestingly, out of the thousands of suggestions for additional uses in the local homesteads, one individual wanted “to use subsistence

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21 “County Resettlement began Two Years Ago,” n.d. (April 1937?), clipping files, Department of Southern History, Birmingham Public Library.
homesteads for eugenic experiments,” planning to mix bloodlines such as “introducing Quaker stock into an Alabama colony.” A dancing teacher suggested using the homesteads to “introduce Greek Robes and aesthetic dancing into colonies of clumsy farmers.”22 As exciting and thought-provoking as these ideas might have seemed, none were implemented in any of the Alabama homesteads.

The four Jefferson County homesteads were located in Trussville (also referred to as Cahaba Village or Slagheap Village), Palmerdale (Palmer or Mt. Pinson), Mt. Olive (Gardendale) and Greenwood (Bessemer). The Jefferson County homestead project employed approximately 2,500 local men.23 Upon a man’s hiring, his name was typically (even temporarily) removed from the ever growing list of families in need of relief. The government employed surveyors, engineers, field checkers and a wide variety of specialties, such as graders to begin the initial plans. Featured articles appeared in local newspapers daily, citing both the number of workers employed in such projects and the hopeful families anxious to apply for project houses. Although the idea of home ownership appealed to a large number of people, only those who met the government’s strict requirements would be considered. The application process included lengthy forms, several interviews, and socio-economic background information. The forms included questions based on number of children, debts incurred, credit history, as well as national background and race.

While the homesteads were meant to elevate the dire living conditions of the poor, the subsistence homesteads were not intended for the population as a whole. One of the

22 Conkin, 99.
criticisms of the homestead projects centers around the exclusion of the poorest of the poor and non-whites. The plan for the homesteads did not embrace such social goals of integration; rather, the target involved placing white families with like backgrounds in the same neighborhood with the expectation that they would work together to grow their communities and develop a unique identity. In particular, families with men who were employed with the same companies or factories with wives and young children fitting between economic thresholds were the ideal. Determined individuals endured the visit from a social worker to their current home, as well as those of their neighbors to ascertain the reputation of the intended family. These houses were strictly for white families in which the men earned a salary around $1,200 a year, and their female spouses possessed special skills, such as canning or horticulture. (The national median family income was $1,160 in 1935.) In addition, the families had to be healthy, in order to work the land. Successful applicants were those who had “stable employment in the mills, mines, factories or commercial establishments of the district.”

An integral factor in the success of the homesteads was the ability to grow crops to feed families. Agricultural specialists from what is now Auburn University provided expert advice to each community to aid in this success. Once homesteads were established, cooperative agencies visited homesteads, interviewed women, and taught classes. The efforts put forth by the state and federal government to not only start the

26 George Nagel, “City Dwellers Turn Farmer On Resettlement Projects: Successful Applicants For Homesteads Must Have Jobs With Income Between $1,000 and $2,000.” *The Birmingham News-Age-Herald*, n.d., clipping files, Department of Southern History, Birmingham Public Library.
farming areas of the homestead, but also to continue the families education went a long way in making homesteaders feel empowered in their new lives.

To promote physical and moral health of the homestead, “only families with good reputations” would be considered for homes within the homesteads. If their reputations should slip, they were to be “expelled from the community.”27 In virtually all the literature provided to prospective owners, a strong sense of decency and patriotism was expected of any applicant and his spouse.

Additionally, government publications listed that homesteaders (both men and women) must be United States citizens. Both husband and wife were required to sign the purchase contract, an unusual request for wives at this time. The successful applicant needed to be married with children or stating children were desired.28 Families remaining childless were more likely to move out of the homestead than those who children.29 Families with farming backgrounds were moved to the top of the application list. Wives with canning or horticultural experience established a firm marker for their families in the long line of applicants. In retrospect, the role of women in the application process was one of vital importance.

It was the government’s aspiration that in less than three decades, homesteaders would own these houses outright, free of the homestead loan or rental agreement. Typically the homestead houses began as rentals and the rent could be applied toward ownership. Most applicants saw this as an excellent opportunity. By renting the homestead houses, families were able to experiment with the land while attempting to acclimate in their new neighborhood. If they enjoyed the experiment, rent-to-own

27 “Homes of Mud to Last 1,000 Years.” The Birmingham News—Age-Herald, July 26, 1936.
28 “A Homestead and Hope.”
29 Wager, 49-50.
packages were available within two years. If dissatisfied, families moved. Interestingly, families not only moved out of the homestead, often they moved to another homestead or in a larger house in the same homestead.

However, one may wonder why a family would move to a homestead, leaving the urban setting of nearby cities such as Birmingham, to live in a more rural setting. Most men viewed this as an unbelievable opportunity for home ownership. Prior to the homesteads, it was not uncommon for couples to cohabitate with the husband or wife’s family during the early years of their marriage. Because America was struggling with a deep depression, home and land ownership was viewed as a dream. After purchasing or renting a homestead house, men continued their jobs, often in Birmingham or around the outer edges of the central city: “The man works in town and rides the community bus back and forth each morning and each afternoon.”30 The men, typically employed on short stints or irregular shifts, complimented their income with cash crops from their gardens. Even without a cash crop, families supplemented their grocery needs by growing their own instead of purchasing food.

Some men and women in the new homesteads decided that farm life was not for them. Yet the majority of homesteaders welcomed the experiment and enjoyed their new surroundings. To some it was a chance to work their own land and escape the dirt and grime of the areas closer to the inner-city. One lawyer stated:

I want a chance to get back to the earth and feel I have something to lean back against. I want a chance to give my wife and children fresh vegetables and fruit from their own garden. I want a chance to be able to do something with my hands toward existing. I want to give my little one a chance to get off the hot pavements and breathe clean, untainted air.31

30 “Homes of Mud to Last 1,000 Years,” The Birmingham News—Age-Herald, July 26, 1936.
The homestead applicants were ready for a change. They wanted a new way of life, possibly through a romanticized image of working on a farm. In this small way, a man had control of his property, knew his neighbors, worked together with the community and nurtured his family in their own dwelling. These were working class people who wanted to continue working for both their families and the betterment of their community. According to an interview with a Mt. Olive resident, Clarice Fuller, very few women “had jobs but they wanted to work, even though some never had worked on a farm.” She noted that setting up a house was like a “return to a lost childhood.”

It would seem that life removed from parents and city life would be a deterrent; yet women also yearned for life in the homestead. As most women did not work outside the home, the homestead community provided them with matching peers: young, married, most with young families and middle-class white. This also meant that they would be able to set up their own home – a powerful enticement. Women were considered in the ownership process and in their skills as gardeners, canners, farmers, and experience with livestock. It is not enough to say these women were useful; their presence reinforced the idea of the close family unit. A mother not only worked at home and raised children; she partnered with her husband in matters pertaining to agriculture and the financial success of their home and land. The role of women in agriculture was multi-faceted. In addition to her assistance in growing the crops and taking care of the animals (milk cows, feed chickens, for example), women were expected to can goods to

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32 Author interviews with Clarice Fuller, 2008. The Fullers rented one of the rammed earth houses in Mt. Olive.
be used throughout the year. But it was the entire family unit who pulled everything together for their success in the homestead.\textsuperscript{33}

To aid the finances of the family unit, homestead properties were a package deal, with one payment for the house, barn and/or pump house, and land. Jefferson County homestead communities included a barn structure in which one might be able to park a car. Sheds were erected, which often held both a water pump station and a small place for an animal. The homestead co-op stores housed animals for rent, as family-owned animals were costly, not to mention their continual upkeep. Frequently men rented an animal and a plow from the cooperative to till his land. On other occasions, separate smaller loans were made for animals. Families were expected to keep an animal to farm their land, whether it was a mule, horse, or cow. With acreage varying from three to five acres, Jefferson County homesteaders were provided with enough land to start a garden and grow fruit trees. It was suggested that one full acre be devoted to pasture, with part of the remaining land for growing vegetables, “truck crops” (cash crops) such as potatoes, and feed or hay crops.\textsuperscript{34}

The homesteads were referred to as “experiments” throughout every stage of the homestead projects nationwide.\textsuperscript{35} This definition covered multiple facets of the homestead program, including politics, economics, and social welfare. In any experiment, subjects are tested through alterations and in time to prove the intended outcome. If the Jefferson County homesteads are held to this standard of experiment, it can be argued that each homestead successfully completed their tests. While the housing projects varied in expenses, demographics, and construction, over time each homestead accomplished

\textsuperscript{33} Clarice Fuller; Wager 48-51.  
\textsuperscript{34} Wager, 8, 25.  
\textsuperscript{35} Wager, 7.
the goals of the program. Currently, all four of the communities are still inhabited, recognized as a part of the homestead program, and many homeowners continue to incorporate small farming and raising livestock. Not only did these homesteads survive, they paved the way for future development within the community area.

While the scale of this project included massive construction projects affecting transportation, electrical power, water and sewage systems, and commerce, the subsistence homestead programs were a small part of the overall New Deal plans. As the country had experienced an every-man-for-himself attitude toward life, through poverty and inadequate shelter, the New Deal agencies encouraged a sense of community. This point caused harsh criticism throughout Roosevelt’s administration as many of his relief plans were viewed as communistic, including the subsistence housing programs. However, this thesis points to the positives—the long-lasting edifices and the identity of the community itself.

It is these positives that I wish to explore in the following pages. With any experiment, methods are tried and different outcomes appear. Variables play a key factor in success, including location and community backgrounds. Using the homesteads as a social experiment challenged government agencies to view poverty-stricken areas with new ideas—making the most out of what was available. These government “dreamers” looked beyond what had been done before to create a long-standing set of homestead communities throughout the country. Unfortunately, not all of these homesteads survived. But the Jefferson County homesteads did, and are still recognized by their still semi-rural locations and identity as an individual community.
CHAPTER 2
THE JEFFERSON COUNTY HOMESTEADS

Introduction

The four Jefferson County homesteads, chosen from 75 suggested sites, were located within 20 miles of downtown Birmingham. The homestead sites were chosen by a local committee, headed by industrialist Erskine Ramsay. While the subsistence homesteads varied from state-to-state, they were all designed for low-income families and were to be operated as small farms as well. In Alabama, this type of aid was especially important since 64.5% of all farmers in the state were tenants or sharecroppers. In 1934, the federal government inspected the housing situation in Birmingham. Roughly 4% of the houses inspected were unfit for habitation, almost 20% had no running water, 47% did not have indoor toilets, and 64% “had neither bathtubs nor showers. The city had an extreme housing shortage for low-income families.”

According to the 1935 census, the average annual cash farm income was $91 per family in Alabama: “They lacked livestock, farming tools, food, feed, and adequate household equipment. The shacks in which they lived ranked with the worst city slums. …With no

36 Linn, Tipton, and White, 38.
39 Wayne Flynt, Poor but Proud: Alabama’s Poor Whites (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 305.
credit and virtually no assets they were at the bottom of the ladder economically, in body and in spirit.”

While there existed an elite class of wealthy residents, the Birmingham area had not been recognized for their efforts in aiding those less fortunate. In historian Wayne Flynt’s book, *Poor but Proud*, he mentioned a 1933 study of cities with more than 120,000 residents. Out of the 68 cities examined, Birmingham ranked “next to last in per capita expenditures on vital city services.” With little local relief, the Birmingham area was in dire need of federal relief, as nearly 100,000 people were on relief lists.

As a result of the state’s distress and Senator John H. Bankhead’s political sway, one-fourth of the initial allotment for national subsistence homesteads went to the Jefferson County homesteads and Bankhead Farms. As described in government literature, these subsistence homesteads were to be “modern but inexpensive house and outbuildings, located on a plot of land upon which a family may produce a considerable portion of the food required for home consumption.” The farm portion of the subsistence housing was instrumental in the beginning of the program as returning to the land for food played a key role in improving families’ health. The government’s plan embraced elevating the standard of living while educating the homesteaders in agriculture. In both the black and white homestead communities, representatives from the area extension office taught classes on homemaking, gardening, food preservation and canning. They hoped to achieve communities of families that would work together and share their crops. This communal set-up was expected to also be self-contained.

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40 Pearson, 1.
41 Flynt, 305-306.
42 Ibid., 306.
43 A Homestead and Hope.
purchasing products from the co-op that could not be grown from the ground or hand-made. 44

Before the homesteads, many young couples (some with children) lived in small apartments or with extended families. If selected for the homestead program, this would be the first time most of them lived in a new house. Later, it would be the first time they had ever purchased a house. While thousands of applications were received in the area Resettlement office, a survey by property tax officials stated, “most families selected

Figure 2: Map of the Jefferson County Homesteads. Source: National Archives, Washington, D.C. Revised January 1933.

came from respectable industrial neighborhoods and rural areas, not from slum districts.”

Placing the homesteads near enough to travel back and forth to work proved especially helpful. Many men at this time worked industrial positions, such as in local mines or factories. These positions usually afforded work only a few days a week. The subsistence homestead program allowed these men to use their idle time working in their gardens, enjoying the benefits of fresh air. To aid them in doing this, the Resettlement Administration published a pamphlet titled “Helping the Farmer Help Himself.” This publication outlined the structure of the rehabilitation loans, which provided contracts for individuals and groups for two to five years. Each homestead was available for rent initially, with very low payments.

The construction of approximately 600 new homes in Jefferson County drastically changed the lives of the homesteaders. (See Appendix A) Many families had previously lived in what equated to shacks near the city center prior to their homestead. This “planned redistribution” of the population directed help to those who were “powerless to extricate themselves unaided, may have an opportunity to gain for themselves some degree of economic security and a more adequate standard of living.” After the initial two-year period, homes were available for purchase, averaging around $3,000 for a house, two to five acres of land and stationary out-buildings, such as a barn and/or garage for one of the Jefferson County homes. In “A Homestead and Hope,” the government clearly defined the subsistent housing for families who “lack[ed] the savings and the

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45 Linn, Tipton, and White, 56.
income to enable them to obtain financing from private sources.” The publication also clarified that the subsistence homesteads would not “compete with private enterprise in the financing of the more fortunate.”

Within the next few decades, a suburban housing movement was established as more highways, bridges and transportation improvements were completed, thanks in large part to the efforts of the WPA. The subsistence homesteads were placed in suburban areas within the state and later became the focal point for incorporated towns. These were planned communities, architecturally and socially as the inhabitants were typically very much alike within the community. According to the government bulletin, “A Homestead and Hope,” paved roads and motor transportation aided in the sense of community as families could move away from cities to healthier atmospheres and “reemphasize the home and family…promot[ing] a worthwhile community life.” This “experiment” involved the style, construction and amenities that were new compared to the existing nearby communities.

The subsistence homesteads were based on the Jeffersonian ideals of expansive land and a home. The twentieth century vision of working in the city and living in the country was recognized through the subsistence homestead program. The homesteads brought modern living to rural and semi-rural areas. The success of these areas encouraged more people to build houses in the area. With more houses came more and better transportation, shopping, and facilities. A primary reason each of the Jefferson County homesteads are located in suburbs today is that they were each successful homesteads.

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47 “A Homestead and Hope.”
48 Ibid.
Palmerdale Homestead

The Palmerdale Homestead, the first homestead built in the Jefferson County area, was located in the northeast part of the county, north of Birmingham. As with several southern homesteads, the Palmerdale Homestead was located in close proximity to dairy farms. The federal government purchased a 690-acre dairy farm in what was then known as Palmer Station, for the Palmerdale Homestead in 1934 at a cost of $57,417.44, or $83 per acre.\(^{49}\) The first houses in the homestead opened for occupancy in 1936, and all homes were completed by early 1937.\(^{50}\)

Like Bankhead Farms in Walker County, the selection of the first homesteaders to the Palmerdale Homestead was made solely by the project manager. A “regional family selection specialist,” a social worker, and later her assistant, aided in the homesteader selection by 1936. As families were placed in homestead properties, these same individuals also asked for what reasons some families left. This questioning helped place future families in the community who would best fit the neighborhood profile.\(^{51}\)

Following the layout of these planned communities, the houses were modest, but of quality construction. The 75 houses in Palmerdale sold for $1,500 to $2,600 each, yet the actual cost of construction was $9,205 each. These brick veneer houses were four to six rooms, with a central fireplace and flue. They featured wells which pumped through the house to provide indoor plumbing. Land with each homestead averaged almost four acres. By 1940 a school, community center and cooperative store were in operation.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{49}\) Wager, 20.
\(^{50}\) Linn, Tipton, and White, 50.
\(^{51}\) Wager, 40-43.
\(^{52}\) “FSA Announces Purchase Plan: Palmerdale Residents To Be Given Opportunity To Buy Homes,” *The Birmingham Age Herald*, January 24, 1940; Wager 25.
The first homesteaders endured a harsh winter and muddy ground, leaving some vehicles stuck in the mud, even in their own driveways. With little insulation and no underpinning (which came later), several families left the homestead within the first few months. Those who lasted until the spring planted gardens and started raising farm animals. Gradually conditions improved and a real sense of community developed. While the pioneering lifestyle proved difficult, families stated that leaving the city and having a safe place for children to play were strong motivators to start a new life in the homestead.\textsuperscript{53}

The Palmerdale Homestead was comprised of working class families. Men worked in local factories, such as Stockham Pipe Fittings Company and U.S. Pipe Company. They either carpoled to work or rode a local train that passed through the homestead twice a day.\textsuperscript{54} Women generally held the roles of mother and wife, working in the home and garden. Special home beautification programs and garden clubs existed in the homesteads for women to both socialize and learn from one another.\textsuperscript{55} These types of activities provided camaraderie and a cohesive community.

In 1981, a UAB student, Joe C. Lilly, conducted an oral interview with an original Palmerdale Homesteader, Mrs. Jean Walker. Much of the information compiled on early life in the homestead originates from her interview. According to Mrs. Walker, many of the skilled craftsmen in the area were unemployed. With the RA building the homestead nearby, “bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, and electricians” were able to maintain steady employment for some time. Men and women formed civic organizations (such as

\textsuperscript{54} Walker interview.
\textsuperscript{55} Wager, 70.
Civitans), with men “anxious to get people in one frame of mind to make progress for the community.” The most obvious need was for a school. After several years and petitions, the WPA built the Palmerdale school and sold it to Jefferson County’s Board of Education for one dollar.56

Another issue in need of resolution included the use of a nearby post office. Prior to the building of the post office in 1936, residents sorted mail in a big pasteboard box in a nearby store. The community co-op store followed, staying in operation for a few years before the government sold it to a homesteader. The community also felt a bank to be an important asset, so it formed the Palmerdale Credit Union in 1938. The Palmerdale Homestead established organizations, community buildings, and programs both with the aid of the government and on their own.57 Newspaper accounts stated that with Palmerdale’s growth, juvenile delinquency became an issue. In Paul Wager’s book, One Foot on the Soil, he suggested the lack of recreational leadership and idle time were major causes of vandalism in the Jefferson County homesteads.58 As a result, the community started one of the first extended day schools (daycare) under the authority of Jefferson County.59

During community meetings, food was prepared from products raised in the homestead, and Alabama Power Company provided instructional movies on proper gardening techniques. Families have been quoted as stating their medical bills dropped and their pantries were full since becoming homesteaders. Another unique aspect of the Palmerdale Homesteads was that there was a blacksmith shop and tool repair shop next to

56 Walker interview.
57 Ibid.
58 Wager, 74.
the school, in case plows broke down or work animals needed to be shoed. Various visitors to the Palmerdale Homestead cited it as a model community.60

A strong sense of community was present then, and continues to be so. In Mrs. Walker’s words: “The [homestead] people have had a sense of unity in what they did, even though a lot of our people have died, some have moved away, many others have moved in, still there is a certain amount of unity of spirit here that hangs on and we do for each other.”61


60 Lane Carter, “Palmerdale Is Cited By Teacher As Model For Community Living: Dr. Vaughan, Montevallo, Views Such Projects As ‘Hope of America,”’ The Birmingham News, August 13, 1943; Clyde Cruse, “Model Colony Residents Prepare For Christmas,” The Birmingham Post, December 24, 1935; Jack House, “547 Homesteaders In District Now Enjoy More Abundant Life: 2, 200 Tenants Raise Their Own Vegetables, Have Time to Participate In War Industries,” The Birmingham News—Age-Herald, May 9, 1943.

61 Walker interview.
Figure 4: Homestead house in Palmerdale, Alabama, June 2012. Photo by author. Note the similarities between the houses. This house had the original coal building to the right.

Figure 6: House in Palmerdale Homestead, June 2012. Photo by author. Note the style of the house compared with Library of Congress photos. Other than the extensions/renovations, the structure is very much like the original designs for the homestead houses.

Figure 7: “Five-room house, Southern colonial style, at the Palmerdale Homesteads near Birmingham, Alabama.” Photograph by Carl Mydans, June 1936. Source: Library of Congress, http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/pnp/fsa/8b28000/8b28900/8b28903r.jpg.
Figure 8: Palmerdale Homestead Community Center (formerly school and community center), June 2012. Photo by author.

Figure 9: House in the Palmerdale Homestead, June 2012. Photo by author. Note the enclosed front porch. Much of the house retains original look.
Figure 10: “Palmerdale Homestead boys working a watermelon patch near their house, Palmerdale, Alabama.” Photograph by Carl Mydans, June 1936. Source: Library of Congress, http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/pnp/fsa/8b28000/8b28900/8b28905r.jpg.

Figure 11: Palmerdale Homestead pasture next to homestead house, June 2012. Photo by author. The Palmerdale Homestead area is still semi-rural, with field animals and vegetable gardens.
Greenwood Homestead

Opened in April 1936, Greenwood was one of the smaller homesteads. Greenwood included septic tanks, a co-op and grocery store and a school/community center. It was the only homestead built south of Birmingham’s city center. The Greenwood homestead is now located in the Bessemer city limits, just 15 miles from Birmingham’s city center. Bessemer grew as a result of businessman Henry F. DeBardeleben’s building of the first steel furnace in the area in 1887. Although the Greenwood Homestead has been incorporated in the city of Bessemer, the area is still identified as the homestead.

Similar to the properties of the other Jefferson County homesteads, Greenwood developed from a large farm and plantation known as “Greenwood.” In the 1910s, a sawmill began operating near the farm. Shortly thereafter a railroad spur linked the property along with cars for use in the nearby mining industry. Later the land became available for other industries as well. In 1927 Rosser Dairy developed a portion of the land for commercial use. A group of rental houses also dotted the area prior to homesteading.

The Depression took a great toll on these renters, with most of them in extreme debt when the government bought the land in May 1934. The land and all the buildings involved were sold to the Birmingham Homesteads, Inc., the local division of the subsistence homesteads project. The existing rental homes did not stand up to the

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62 Linn, Tipton, and White, 52.
64 Mildred Moore McCrimmon Crain, Welcome to Greenwood (Montgomery, AL: Times Printing Company, 1990), 1-4.
government standards for the project and were torn down and burned. The resulting land was surveyed and divided for the 83 homestead houses.65

Greenwood contained 402 acres and cost $20,139.25, approximately $50 per acre.66 The homestead plan, developed by Birmingham landscape professional William Holmquist, included the roads, houses, store and related buildings, and the joint school/community center.67 The typical Greenwood Homestead property included a house with four to six rooms, three to five acres of land, a “barn, which contained [a] garage, cow stall, chicken house, and an area for storing feed and tools.” Each property was equipped with a small coal house near the back door, often misidentified (both then and now) as an outhouse. Portions of each property had fenced areas for livestock. Homesteaders later added chicken houses and grazing perimeters for larger animals. A unique aspect of this homestead involved a central water system for the community. Earlier homesteads had wells and pumps transferring water into the houses via outdoor bodies of water.68

Greenwood was heavily advertised in the local papers, and homestead administrators attempted to entice more community leaders to the area. Of the four aims listed in an article from The Birmingham News in 1936, one was to “employ persons who are already equipped or who may be trained as recreation [leaders] to create a community desire for organized recreation which will result in permanent programs to be continued when federal funds are not available.” Additional goals included activities for children

65 Crain, 10.
67 Linn, Tipton, and White, 52.
68 Crain 11; Linn, Tipton, and White, 52; Wager, 32.
and adults and the investment of cultural arts. These early projects developed into the Bessemer Park and Recreation Board, which is still in operation.69

The community opened for occupancy on January 30, 1937. While all 83 houses were occupied, 92 families moved in and 14 moved out the first full year. Heavy turnover continued through the next four years, until full occupancy arrived in 1943. The following years showed much less turnover. Despite the many reasons behind Greenwood’s successes, the reason most given for leaving the homestead included “general dissatisfaction or disappointment.” Greenwood holds this distinction singularly, as the highest ranking reasons in other area homesteads ranged from financial difficulties to issues with work and transportation.70

Financially, the Greenwood Homestead was overall quite successful. For two short years, Greenwood had a credit union, but it ultimately folded as incomes improved and the nation geared up production for the impending war.71 On June 14, 1937, the Greenwood Cooperative Association organized. With a co-op store already in the homestead, the community decided to build a barn and hire men for several operational positions. A store manager, assistant manager, and superintendent of farm services started working for the homestead. As with many projects in the homesteads, the FSA cooperative marketing specialist assisted the start-up of these business ventures. In addition, the Association secured a loan with the federal government to stock inventory and hire staff. As promising as this community co-op might have seemed, it continued to lose money, eventually discontinuing operations on October 1, 1940. This is particularly

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70 Wager, 59-60.
71 Ibid., 128, 60-61
odd as there were no other stores with comparable products for miles. New management assumed a different business model and the store flourished. Of all the Jefferson and Walker County homesteads, Greenwood’s Cooperative Association was the only one to completely repay the government’s original loan.72

Greenwood was also socially unique as it had a long-standing arts and crafts club. According to historian Paul Wager, “…this community has had, and perhaps still has, more social activity than any of the others.” This sentiment extended to children as well. In interviews conducted in 1941, out of 40 women only three stated their children did not like rural life.73

The Greenwood area thrived and grew, adding more homes, industries, and offices. The WPA constructed what is now the Bessemer City Hall, the Bessemer Board of Education building (previously the welfare office), Roosevelt City Park, a section of the Bessemer Super Highway, as well as infrastructure such as laying pipe and maintaining ditch areas. They also preserved a Native American burial mound area.74 In addition to these large construction projects, the homestead architect left the floodplains of Rice Creek as an open woodland space so the homesteaders might enjoy a nearby nature area.75

As the smallest of the Jefferson County homesteads, Greenwood was big on social and economic ventures, which helped to create a livable city. Greenwood today is still a quiet, semi-rural area with large, flat patches of land that were once used to grow

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72 Wager, 116-118.
73 Linn, Tipton, and White, 52; Wager, 70, 75.
74 Homer C. White.
75 Linn, Tipton, and White, 52.
crops for the community. Now these areas of land host model airplane shows and provide plenty of room for children to play.


Figure 14: Home in Greenwood area, June 2012. Photo by author.
Mt. Olive Homestead

The Mt. Olive Homestead was located in the northern section of Jefferson County, approximately 10 miles from Birmingham’s city center. As with several other Alabama homesteads, this homestead has been referred to by several names: Mount Olive, Mt. Olive, and Gardendale. While the homestead area was situated in the non-incorporated portion of Jefferson County known as Mt. Olive, the closest incorporated town was Gardendale. The Resettlement Administration sign listed the name of the project as “Gardendale Homesteads.” Currently the homestead is regarded as part of Mt. Olive, although Gardendale residents often cite the homesteads as ‘on the line’ separating incorporated and unincorporated areas. Children who live in the homestead neighborhood today are zoned for Gardendale-area schools. Both Gardendale and Mt. Olive are considered suburbs of Birmingham.

The residents of the Mt. Olive homestead were working class families. The Mt. Olive community was centered around several small coal mines, including Mineral Springs, Crocker Junction, and Brookside. Many homesteaders worked at the American Cast Iron Pipe Company (ACIPCO) in North Birmingham. According to one homesteader, some of the ACIPCO men carpooled, with each man taking his turn every fourth week.76

On April 1, 1936, more than 1,000 men began building houses and community buildings on the homesteads. One of the later projects completed, the Mt. Olive homestead had previously been a dairy farm. The 512-acre land officially became the Mt. Olive Cooperative Association on June 14, 1937.77 The first five housing units became available for occupancy several months earlier, in January 1937.78 With a co-op store and a homestead manager hired, the homestead’s 75 houses exemplified a model community in the area. The co-op featured dry goods, a stable, tools, feed for animals, and a hotbed for forcing the maturity of plants. The community co-op stables allowed homesteaders to rent a mule and a plow for twenty cents an hour.79 The store performed extremely well, increasing productivity, yet, similar to other co-op stores, it ultimately did not gain enough profits to stay in business.80 It is likely the Mt. Olive co-op store suffered the fate of several other homestead co-ops as outside competition lured customers away.

The homestead project included the following roads: Mt. Olive, Rosemary, Springdale and Westwood. Homesteads had an average of three to five acres. Included in the homestead package were a combination barn and garage, cow pasture and, in some

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76 Nagel, “City Dwellers Turn.”
77 Wager, 112.
78 Linn, Tipton, and White, 56.
79 Nagel.
80 Wager, 112-115.
properties, chicken houses.\textsuperscript{81} These animal areas were also fenced before families moved in to their new homes. Cleared and graveled streets led up to and were within the homestead.\textsuperscript{82}

The houses ranged in size from four to six rooms. With the exception of the seven rammed earth houses (next section), the homestead consisted of wood frame and brick houses. The foundation of each house was brick or concrete. All houses had a kitchen and bathroom with water pumped directly outside and channeled indoors. Indoor plumbing, along with electricity, made these houses an enviable product, especially for young families.

The per unit cost for Mt. Olive homestead houses was $8,242, considerably less than the first two Jefferson County homesteads (average $9,412) and far less than Walker County, Alabama’s Bankhead Farms ($10,464).\textsuperscript{83} Despite the lower cost of these houses, the Mt. Olive homestead achieved an excellent return on investment as they were well-built and cared for by the residents. One important measure of success for this homestead can be attributed to the lowest number of home ownership turnovers of the Jefferson and Walker County homesteads.\textsuperscript{84} Today the area also experiences a low homeowner turnover rate, with many families having lived in the community for decades. Families also took advantage of the extra land and built homes for their children on the property.

Attesting to this homestead’s success, southern historian Wayne Flynt stated, “[t]he Mount Olive experiment recognized a fundamental fact of life in depression-

\textsuperscript{81} Linn, Tipton, and White, 56.
\textsuperscript{82} Marjorie Longenecker White, \textit{The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide} (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Historical Society, 1998), 300.
\textsuperscript{83} Conkin, 332-337.
\textsuperscript{84} Wager, 42.
wracked Alabama, the problem of inadequate housing.\textsuperscript{85} Currently the community maintains its identity as “the colony.” Except for one house that burned, the Mt. Olive Homestead still contains all of the houses in the original plan. However, because families gave land to their children, there is a conglomeration of new and old houses in the homestead. For this reason, the homestead cannot be recognized for national historic status.

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\textsuperscript{85} Flynt, 305.
Rammed Earth Houses

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the homestead “experiment” involved the building of seven houses constructed of rammed earth in the Mt. Olive Homestead. Today many people refer to these as “mud” houses. As head of the Resettlement Administration, Rexford Tugwell wanted housing that could be constructed cheaply but efficiently. Several methods were tried throughout the country, including concrete-slab construction. However, the most radical construction experiment was found in the rammed earth houses.\(^86\) The chief engineer for the Resettlement Administration and architect for the rammed earth houses, Thomas Hibben, had been educated in prominent universities both in America and abroad. After witnessing various construction methods in Europe, Hibben believed the earth tamping method would apply to a similar project for low-cost housing. Initially, the government felt the rammed earth style homes were too experimental. Hibben swayed the doubters and compromised to build the homes on the back portion of the homestead (Rosemary Road), in case the project was not successful. These rammed earth houses did not reflect the original master plan for the Mt. Olive homestead initially. The government and the local builders were optimistically cautious about this experiment-within-an-experiment. Despite the naysayers, Mr. Hibben’s architectural plan was successful, as was the entire homestead design.\(^87\)

The rammed earth houses were actually considered a secret mini-homestead until Tugwell visited the area and pronounced them a success. Hibben, who accompanied Tugwell on the visit, stated the secrecy of the project to a local newspaper columnist, “You must understand that the work going on at Gardendale is the government’s

\(^{86}\) Conkin, 170-171.
\(^{87}\) Marjorie White, 301.
experimental station. We are trying all kinds of things here before we feel that we are fully ready to go before the country and tell what we have learned and what we recommend…“88 Tugwell’s proclamation piqued interests about the homestead. Applicants were motivated to explore the country setting via government literature, newspaper articles and word of mouth.

These houses hold the honor of the only rammed earth houses built by the Resettlement Administration as part of the subsistence homestead program. In the western U.S., several communities mirrored the adobe-style architecture and building components, yet their construction was quite different from the rammed earth houses. In order to build a rammed earth house, one needs both the correct type of dirt and wood needed to be plentiful. The readily available materials came at a fraction of the cost of the other building materials in the homestead. Labor, however, comprised the largest expense as the first rammed earth house took five weeks to complete and the last only five days.89 As with much of this overall subsistence experiment, workers, administrators and “reliefers” learned through trial and error.90

The process of creatingrammed earth exterior and interior walls was fairly simple. Dirt was dug from around the worksite, along with wood and other materials for building the forms. The pressed dirt was moistened, and then mixed with bits of sand, gravel or similar substances. Wooden frames held the foundation. Separate wooden forms were placed to hold the dirt mixture on top of the foundation. A different set of wooden

88 James Saxon Childers, “Homes of Mud to Last 1,000 Years: Centuries-Old Way Of Building Used At Gardendale, The Birmingham News—Age-Herald, July 26, 1936; Clyde Cruse, Success! County Homes Built ‘Dirt Cheap!’: Tamped Earth Is Used To Erect Dwellings At Gardendale, Resettlement Administration Completes Experiment In Jefferson County; Sides Are Impervious As Stone; Fireproof Advantage Cited By Architect,” The Birmingham Post Herald, July 14, 1936.
89 Linn, Tipton, and White, 58.
90 The WPA Guide to 1930s Alabama, Writers’ Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Alabama (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2000), 263.
tools resembling blunt trowels were used to ram the dirt firmly into place in a process called tamping. After this layer hardened, the forms were moved up and a new layer tamped. Workers produced a set of rhythmic strokes to tamp the earth down. A dry period of several days would aid in the curing of the walls. Occasionally walls were scarred with building tools to provide a rougher texture. Finally a sealant of boiled linseed oil was applied to preserve the outer walls.91

Because the rammed earth house style was unfamiliar to applicants, many expressed a preference for traditional housing. However, it was the local administration’s decision as to whom would be assigned which house. Some were surprised to learn they had leased a new house of mud. According to an early homesteader, her family felt concerned that the first good rain might wash part of their house away, along with the family’s financial investment. 92

The finished house was comparable to living in a cave with thick walls, which naturally heated and cooled the air inside. The walls were virtually fireproof. Today these houses would be considered “green,” since the materials needed to build them were easily accessible, with little lumber harvested, and very little, if any side effects from the building process. Materials not available on site were purchased in Birmingham, adding to the local economy. The walls of the houses were approximately 18 inches thick, and similar in appearance to concrete. The sheds and barns were also built with the same wall thickness, and their style and complemented the layout of the house. (See Fig. 17) The roofs were flat and finished with tar paper and tar mixed with gravel. Several occupants

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91 Childers, “Homes of Mud.”; Cruse, “Success! County Homes Built”; Linn, Tipton, and White, 58.
92 Author interviews with Clarice Fuller, 2008. Ms. Fuller’s family rented one of the rammed earth houses.
stated at one time the roofs were painted in alternating black and white stripes, so as to channel hot and cold air. Every roof had metal trims which protruded from small eaves.

Each house had one window, which was located in the bathroom. All other openings were French doors which reached from floor to ceiling, and were purchased at Birmingham Sash and Door. At least one of the homes also had a screen door installed. Some homes had a latch on one of the French door glass panes to allow it to open without opening the entire door to ventilate the home. The ceilings were made from wood planks. Most of the homes were built on a concrete slab. The plumbing was located underneath the poured concrete. However, one house, the Cousins’, was thought to be one of the first built and has a wooden floor. Mr. Cousins stated there was termite damage at one point and much of the foundation had to be replaced, which proved difficult considering the frame of the rest of the house.

Not everyone in the general vicinity of the homestead had running water before the homesteads were built. The homestead provided some form of running water in each of the houses. In the Wilson house (see Figures 17 and 18), the water pump had a chain with buckets which rotated and picked up water. The water was dumped into a tank which allowed a type of indoor plumbing as it was piped into the house.

The rammed earth houses reflected Frank Lloyd Wright’s Usonian-style homes, with clean low lines incorporating the surrounding landscape and centrally located fireplaces. One side of the rammed earth fireplace was open to the large living room.

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94 Author interviews with Scott Cousins, 2008. The Cousins family owns and lives in a rammed earth house.
other side was open to the bedrooms and bath. Renovations included installation of coal burning heaters, gas logs and electrical blowers. The electricity was wired within the walls. Central heat and air conditioning was not available; but cross-ventilation through French doors allowed breezes to cool the house while the thick walls retained heat from the central fireplace in colder periods.96

The Mt. Olive homestead community had possibly the best press coverage in the South, due to the rammed earth houses. Visitors from around the world came to see houses made of mud. Some of the more notable visitors included Mrs. Roosevelt and Premier Jawaharlal Nehru of India in 1951, along with his wife and India’s Prime Minister.97

The federal government agencies planned and executed impressive engineering and displayed an amount of resourcefulness that was beyond expectations. While the government struggled to keep men working after a dramatic economic crisis, they also became creative. There were agencies to pay individuals to paint buildings, design advertisements for the government and photograph people around the country in their living conditions. Oddly enough, they found men willing to make houses out of dirt. The experimental rammed earth houses in the Mt. Olive Homestead symbolized more than just hard work or even architectural creativity: It was a form of returning to and rising from the earth.

Both the Mt. Olive Homestead and the rammed earth houses were also types of social experiments. While others scoffed at these New Deal plans, particularly the

96 Ibid.
rammed earth houses, another group of citizens were fighting for success. In accomplishing this victory, each homesteader relied on neighbors, just as the family unit depended on each other. To remain triumphant, every person committed themselves to the goal of self-sufficiency in their homestead community. Their evidence of a strong work ethic and belief that the experiment would not only work, but thrive, became a testament to the legacy of Roosevelt and his New Deal.

**Figure 17:** “Rammed earth houses nearing completion near Birmingham, Alabama.” (House, pump house and shed shown.) Photograph by Thomas Hibben, 1937. Source: Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa2000000331/PP/. (Note the house on the main level, the pump house just under the grade of the housing, followed by the garage on the lowest point of the slope.)
Figure 18: Wilson house. Rammed earth house in Mt. Olive. Photo by author, 2010. Note the extending pillars in the front of the house as above Library of Congress photo.

Cahaba Homestead

The Cahaba homestead was also referred to as Cahaba Village, Slagheap Village, or more recently, as part of the city of Trussville, Alabama. The Cahaba Homestead was located approximately 16 miles from downtown Birmingham. The homestead, purchased from Birmingham-Trussville Iron Company, covered 750 acres and was previously home to an abandoned iron smelting operation, coke ovens, slag pile and numerous company houses.98

While not solely distinguished with Cahaba, one example of the far-reaching southern racial attitudes of this time could be found in the Cahaba Homestead. When the land was purchased to build the homestead, it was already occupied by forty black families. The federal government decided to relocate these existing black families to an

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98 Linn, Tipton, and White, 64; Wager 22, 190-191. Wager states the amount of acreage at 811 while Linn, et. al., state 750. The author is willing to accept the lower number.
area outside of town called “The Forties,” giving them approximately one week to move. Not only were the blacks removed, but all the graves in the black cemetery were exhumed and relocated within The Forties as well. The existing houses were burned, as nothing was salvageable. These forty families set up “shacks and shanties, carrying their water from the valley, while white tenants moved into the beautiful new homes constructed on their old homesites.”

The homestead cost $2,760,610.47, which was the most expensive homestead in Alabama and least suited for subsistence homesteads due to the industrial debris and poor soil. Nevertheless, the Cahaba Homestead was “planned for industrial workers of the district.” The homestead plan for Cahaba differed slightly from the other three Jefferson County homesteads. Instead of three to five acres of land with each house, the homestead blueprints designated an average of one acre lot with each home. While Cahaba was still semi-rural, the homestead planners hoped to make the homestead more of a greenbelt town while still holding on to aspects of subsistence homesteads.

RA administration Rexford Tugwell longed for more greenbelt towns: large planned communities featuring small house lots, municipal and community buildings, and open green space for recreation. Therefore, the subsistence homesteads ranked low on his list of projects. Yet Tugwell wrote that the Cahaba Homestead should be “designed to provide greatly needed adequate housing and improved living conditions for families of industrial workers and white collar employees of the Birmingham area in Jefferson County…” Tugwell noted that few homes in the area had any type of indoor

99 Marion W. Ormond, interview by Bob Haynes, April 17, 1981, UAB Mervyn Sterne Library Archives; Carol and Early Massey, Trussville through the Years (2010), chapter IV; Conkin, 202 (as referenced from the National Archives, R.G. 83).
100 Conkin, 111, 332; Jackson 309.
bathrooms, running water, or central heat. With the development of this homestead, he and the other recovery program workers were determined to change these living conditions.\textsuperscript{101}

The Cahaba Homestead was built on an abandoned furnace, lending the original name to the site. Materials remaining from the slag pile and bricks from buildings were repurposed as street paving material. Much of the initial plans for subsistence farming were scrapped in favor of making the land more of a greenbelt area with open, community parks.\textsuperscript{102} As a part of the national greenbelt project, Cahaba offered large swaths of parklands along the Cahaba River, both encircling and running through the homestead project. This aesthetic feature differentiated the Cahaba Homestead from the other three in Jefferson County. The homestead included the “construction of a waterworks, sewage disposal plant, utilities installation, street and sidewalk paving, curbs, gutters, 3 public buildings, and 287 dwelling units including 44 duplexes.”\textsuperscript{103}

After its completion in 1938, Cahaba was one of the largest subsistence homesteads in the country. At close to $3 million, there is little wonder the project has stood as one of the better built and kept homesteads in Alabama.\textsuperscript{104} It received historic recognition in 2002 and is now considered part of “old Trussville.” The well-built houses originally sold for under $10,000 each. Currently the same two to four bedroom homes sell for over $200,000.

Much of the credit behind the longevity of these homes should be given to the early homesteaders as they had a strong sense of civic pride and maintained the houses

\textsuperscript{102} Wager, 22.
\textsuperscript{103} Linn, Tipton, and White, 64; Wager 193.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
well. Likewise, upkeep on the houses was important for the project to be seen as a success. Additionally, a number of social and recreational clubs arose, connecting people with like interests. According to Wager, “There has also always been a community club with which a majority have affiliated. This has provided a forum for the discussion of the community-wide problems and has been responsible for numerous public improvements.”

Documents indicate that federal government agencies repaired furniture, sinks, toilets, and garage doors, among other general maintenance tasks, well into the 1940s.

One early resident stated the homestead office kept a key to everyone’s house so that if a person were to become locked out, the homestead manager could assist in gaining entrance. The Cahaba Homestead produced their own newspaper for a number of years called The Hub, which highlighted the names of families who moved in and out, new births and other community activities. (see Fig. 21) The social aspect, along with well-built construction, made this a comfortable community. Despite the passage of time, current residents still feel the sense of identity originally created by the early inhabitants. The community center, one of the better built in the Jefferson County, currently houses a community center and the neighborhood’s public library.

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105 Wager, 200.
107 Marion W. Osmond interview.
Figure 21: Page from The Hub, Cahaba Homestead’s newspaper. This appears to be an early 1939 edition. The names to the right list homestead occupants, their street addresses, and phone numbers.


CHAPTER 3

OTHER SUBSISTENCE HOMESTEADS IN ALABAMA

For purposes of comparing the Jefferson County homesteads with others in the state, this thesis studies the four subsistence homesteads that existed elsewhere in Alabama. In Walker County, Bankhead Farms (named after Senator John Bankhead) housed white families. Skyline Farms, in Jackson County (near the Georgia/Tennessee border), was a large land area developed for a farm community—and also exclusively white. There were just two “Negro” homesteads in Alabama: Prairie Farms in Macon County and Gee’s Bend in Wilcox County. Both black homesteads were located in Alabama’s Black Belt, south of Montgomery.108

African American Homesteads in Alabama

If blacks voted at all before 1932, they traditionally voted Republican out of respect for Lincoln’s party. Because Southern Democrats were segregationists, blacks did were not welcome in the Democratic Party. But in the 1932 presidential election, blacks overwhelmingly voted for the Democratic candidate: Roosevelt.109 According to Lizabeth Cohen, author of Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919 – 1939, the catalyst to political change in the 1930s happened when the black community began voting in federal elections. Some ethnic voters in Chicago believed, “Before Roosevelt,

the Federal Government hardly touched your life. Outside the postmaster, there was little local representation.” After Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, however, “people you knew were appointed to government jobs…” Another stated, “In my neighborhood, I don’t remember anyone voting. They didn’t even know what a polling place was.”

After the Great Depression, the political climate changed. People voted to send Democrats to Washington. They expected the Democrats to provide relief, and agencies such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Civil Works Administration (CWA), and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were created. Voting gave black voters more power on a national scale. Historian William E. Leuchtenburg detailed this idea further in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*: “As early as 1932, G.O.P. politicians had come back with surprising intelligence from Negro wards: ‘They’re getting tired of Lincoln.’ … ‘My friends, go turn Lincoln’s picture to the wall. That debt has been paid in full.’ ” By the election of 1936, “they were substantially Democratic.” Not only did they vote for Roosevelt, but a number became employees as well. Blacks served throughout the alphabet agencies of the New Deal at the federal and local levels. Despite this, blacks recognized the reality of the situation. The campaign promise of a “new deal” for everyone aided many, yet inequities continued along racial lines.

The economic distress experienced in the 1930s particularly impacted to African Americans, who took notice of politicians’ promises of better living and economic conditions, but thought the government had little interest in elevating them out of their current situations. Roosevelt’s New Deal involved aiding the South out of poverty, not

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111 Ibid
112 Leuchtenburg, 189.
“the maintenance (or, for that matter, the elimination) of white supremacy.” However, throughout the Roosevelt administration, some blacks experienced opportunities that few had the fortune to participate in previously. These opportunities included Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet,” comprised of approximately 45 black men and women as unofficial cabinet members.

Whether due to these Black Cabinet members or through another outlet of the administration, the idea of black homesteads became a reality—albeit one that mirrored the South’s racial sentiments: separate and inferior to that of white homesteads. These homesteads abided by the Jim Crow laws of the 1930s and were completely segregated. Homesteads for the black community seemed like a double sided coin: blacks needed better living conditions, but whites would not accept housing for blacks that appeared nicer or even equal to their own. Despite the disparities, the subsistence homestead program afforded homes for hundreds of black families. The factor of race seemed to aid the success of these homesteads. Just as planned, placing families of similar backgrounds did cement the community. If the homesteads had been desegregated, it is doubtful that the community would have been as harmonious.

As eager as blacks were to obtain this new form of government housing and possible home ownership, the subsistence movement was not welcomed by all of the black population. In a 1934 article by writer John P. Murchison (who later served as a member of the Subsistence Homesteads Division), he believed the government

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113 Freidel, 36.
relocated the migrant workers and those unemployed to more industrial centers. Yet he saw some hope in creating a “social experiment” for permanent relief, not just limited to their present economic situation. He continued that,

The Negro, because of his weak economic position, needs these homesteads more than any other group; he needs them because his status, both industrially and agriculturally is more precarious… Agriculturally, he has suffered generally because of the traditional discrimination that confronts him almost everywhere in the rural South and because of his weak marketing position. Recently he met with another hazard which resulted from the efforts of the AAA [Agricultural Adjustment Act] to tighten the cotton belt. Where crop reductions have been required in these sections in which Negroes have worked as sharecroppers, generally it has resulted in these workers being expelled from the soil. In other sections, moreover, farm labor is no longer looked up on as Negro work, because the depression has driven so many whites to perform this work.116

This sentiment harkens back to the late 1800s when black farmers were dependent on white merchants and landlords. These white groups condemned the black cooperatives to failure. Under Jim Crow laws, blacks were not allowed in white cooperatives. Blacks were still under the hand of the white farmer. Black “small farmers” and sharecroppers were dependent on their landlords and merchants for economic survival.117 According to historian Michael McGerr, Populism (at the turn of the century) allowed powerful whites to exclude blacks and poor white farmers from the vote. “Ethnic and racial prejudice kept farmers divided from one another,” although “about three-quarters of a million African-Americans operated farms, mainly in the South…White prejudice against black farmers

had seriously weakened” bi-racial politics. In most cases, especially in the South, black
and white farmers participated in segregated alliances.\textsuperscript{118}

Whereas white families would enjoy new homesteads and small farms, a number
of influential whites argued against similarly apportioned black government housing. In a
nutshell, “aid to Southern Negroes would disturb existing social and economic
relationships.”\textsuperscript{119} Whites “feared that the New Deal would destroy what [journalist
William Ball] regarded as the felicitous protection that the whites extended to the
Negroes in the South.”\textsuperscript{120} Blacks did not have the organization or leadership to fight
white opposition. In time, whites recognized the need for improved living conditions for
blacks, possibly with the condition that the homesteads be geographically distinct.
According to historian Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore: “Even well-meaning whites began to
advocate the betterment of African American homes to turn back the supposed tide of
black debauchery.”\textsuperscript{121}

The few black associations that existed protested several federal government
programs for the South, sensing disenfranchisement once again: “[Black leaders]
protested AAA policies which drove Negro tenant farmers and sharecroppers from the
land, while white landowners pocketed government checks.” In places such as West
Virginia, blacks could not live in the newly planned subsistence homestead, Arthurdale,
nor could they reside in the Tennessee Valley Authority’s new model town of Norris.
One black writer wrote that Negroes “ought to realize by now that the powers-that-be in

\textsuperscript{118} Michael McGerr, \textit{A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America},
\textsuperscript{119} Freidel, 72.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{121} Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, \textit{Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North
the Roosevelt administration have nothing for them.” 122 While the Bankhead Bill’s intent was rooted in the ability of white tenant farmers to achieve land ownership, acquiring land had been an extremely difficult achievement for blacks since the end of Reconstruction.

While housing remained an important issue, a string of lynchings in 1933 encouraged the few organized black associations to instead demand for civil rights legislation. 123 The racial unrest of the 1930s resulted in a number of bills aimed at prohibiting lynching at the federal level and protecting defendants against lynch mobs, such as the Costigan-Wagner Bill of 1934. The Communist Party’s defense organization, the International Labor Defense (ILD), defended Alabama rape cases, including the Scottsboro Boys case in 1931 and quite unsuccessfully, the 1933 trial of three Tuscaloosa men accused of raping a white woman. Despite the National Guard’s involvement, the Tuscaloosa men were denied justice through the court system and were instead handed to the awaiting mob and killed by firing squad. 124 In general, the South welcomed neither outside interference nor federal government involvement in their daily activities.

Regardless of the white sentiment prominent in the South, the federal government was slow to act on the part of blacks. Historian Anthony Badger suggested “[t]he ignorance of even sympathetic liberals like Eleanor Roosevelt mirrored at first the difference with which the NRA [National Recovery Administration] and the AAA regarded blacks. Slowly she and others became aware that black problems could not be

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122 Leuchtenburg, 140.
123 Leuchtenburg, 185.
eradicated by generally targeting poverty.” Eventually, the FSA changed their policies to include black homesteads.125

To achieve some sort of racial balance, Roosevelt appointed blacks to some federal offices, placing a number of them in leadership positions. Blacks felt comfortable in writing to Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt, detailing the issues surrounding their situations. While President Roosevelt kept a busy schedule, Mrs. Roosevelt was often a more accessible source in the White House. In her duties as First Lady, Mrs. Roosevelt was able to discuss political situations with her husband away from the political arena. To her credit, she affected the morality of those to whom she spoke. As a result, many social reforms, including some involving race, were accomplished.

After a number of letters arrived describing the lynchings that occurred in the South, President Roosevelt warned the powerful Southerners in Congress that he would not tolerate these actions, thinly veiling a proposal for an anti-lynching bill. However, the South recognized their political power and pushed back. They threatened to block Roosevelt’s plans to rebuild America.126 Roosevelt’s plans prevailed, however, as the deep, rural poverty of the South grew increasingly desperate. Eventually, half of the subsistence homesteads were built in the Southern states. Yet only thirteen of the almost one hundred homesteads were built for the black population, as the planners upheld Jim Crow laws and favored whites’ amenities over those of blacks.127

126 Luechtenburg, 185-6; Freidel, 84.
On the local level and with the federal government’s assistance, the 1935 Bankhead Bill aimed to help Alabama’s tenant farmers and farm laborers begin the homestead process. While the romantic vision of arable land and homeownership skews some historians’ accounts, there also existed inequalities about how the programs were administrated. This thesis challenges Leuchtenburg’s comment that, “At the risk of its political life, the FSA [Farm Security Act] was scrupulously fair in its treatment of Negroes.” The reality was that blacks were only included in the programs rather than treated as equal beneficiaries. The definition of “fair” is also questionable. While treating blacks fairly might have been a goal, it was not put into practice. Vast differences between white homesteads and black homesteads occurred.

Gee’s Bend

Gee’s Bend, also known as Boykin, was located in Wilcox County, Alabama. An isolated stretch of land, Gee’s Bend was surrounded by the Alabama River on three sides, but navigable by ferry. The area had been the prior home of ex-slaves, who worked the land as “sharecroppers and tenant farmers for absentee white landlords.” Due in part to both the unique geography and federal subsistence homestead movement, the slaves’ descendants live in Gee’s Bend to this day. In the mid-1930s, a population estimate of Gee’s Bend numbered “about seven hundred blacks and one white family.” Traveling to the area required either a ferry ride or a two-hour diversion around the river. Many of the original Pettway family still live in Gee’s Bend and have expanded their creative talents to writing and quilt making.

128 Leuchtenburg, 141.
For Gee’s Bend, the homestead planning situation could not have been more different than the white communities. The (white) Van de Graaff family sold their land to the federal government through the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937. The FSA established Gee’s Bend Farms, Inc., a pilot project of a cooperative-based program. It was understandably worrisome when whites arrived to survey and construct buildings in Gee’s Bend. Yet the “Benders” (as they refer to themselves) recognized their impoverished situation on their unique part of the land and cautiously accepted the opportunities discussed. The government subdivided the property, built houses, and sold tracts of land to the local families—for the first time giving the black population control of the land they had previously worked for generations.

While white outsiders considered the natives of Gee’s Bend to be “probably superior to other Negroes,” other blacks viewed the “Benders” as social outcasts. The surrounding blacks in the county regarded the Gee’s Bend inhabitants as “Africans.” This sentiment might have related to some of the ritualistic practices performed by the inhabitants. According to local clergyman Renwick C. Kennedy, “it is a practice of Gee’s Bend people to bury their dead and then to retire from the cemetery to the church for the funeral service. This order of burial is not practiced in other parts of the country.” Kennedy also mentioned that while the morals in the community were “above average,” it was also quite unconventional. For examples, “a boy and a girl, unable to set up a home of their own will have several children, with or without benefit of clergy, while they continue to live in the home of their respective parents. In time they establish a home of their own.”

While Kennedy referred to the Benders as “primitive…and underprivileged,” he also found them to be very resourceful. Perhaps because of their

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location the Benders were able to set up their own social norms and practices. Incredibly segregated both geographically and socially, “there [was] no more concentrated and racially exclusive Negro population in any rural community in the South than Gee’s Bend.”

Several planners in the Resettlement Administration (and later the Farm Security Administration) believed Gee’s Bend befit the perfect test case in non-white subsistence communal housing and farming in Alabama. Cut off from other communities by water, with only a ferry to transport cars, trucks and supplies, the success of the Gee’s Bend homestead would rely almost completely on the community’s ability to be self-sustainable.

While the four white Jefferson County homesteads included bathrooms, running water, and electricity, Gee’s Bend homesteaders received out-houses and inferior building materials. Planning for the Jefferson County homesteads included placing the homestead within twenty miles of the city center, ensuring viable employment nearby. Gee’s Bend was not located near industries or factories. It does not appear the continued success of the black homestead held much importance in the overall homestead subsistence plan.

Additionally, the Jefferson County houses were modern and featured more updated kitchens with electrical appliances and bathrooms with running water. In contrast, “the [Gee’s Bend] houses did not have running water (each had a bored well with a hand pump in the yard), nor were they wired for electricity. Each house had an outdoor sanitary privy, a large barn, a chicken house, and a smoke house.” In describing Gee’s Bend homesteads, journalist/historian Kathryn Tucker Windham stated, “the new

131 Kennedy, 23.
house for the family was built on the same location where the family’s old pole or plank house stood, a part of the basic philosophy that the project should cause as little disruption or upheaval in the lives of the people as feasible. Greatly enamored with their new housing, some of the Gee’s Bend owners sprinkled salt around the outside of their homes before moving in to rid the dwelling of evil. Many of these same families also kept their windows closed in even the hottest summers so that spirits would not enter the home.

Gee’s Bend homes were also not as large as the typical Jefferson County homestead. It is with great curiosity why planners did not deem black communities with the same sanitary needs (bathrooms) as whites. But any form of improvement—in this case, sturdy shelter—lifted the destitute Benders, even if not to the same degree as whites’ shelters.

Yet the success of the Gee’s Bend homesteads turned out to be surprisingly good. The weather was exceptionally good for the 1936 crops. In addition, project houses replaced substandard shanties, creating a safer, cleaner environment. Even if the Benders had known their housing was inferior to the Jefferson County homesteads, it is doubtful they would have complained since their lives had changed radically. The Gee’s Bend houses had an iron cook stove in the kitchen, the first stove many Gee’s Bend cooks, long accustomed to cooking in the fireplaces, had ever had.

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132 Kathryn Tucker Windham, “They Call It Gee’s Bend,” Gee’s Bend Project Paper and Photographs, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library, 15-16.
133 Windham, 16.
134 Ibid., 15-16.
The local resettlement office noted the success of families in their reports and literature. The vastly improved area also caught the attention of the surrounding community and local leaders:

Patrick Bendoff has a family of 15. The Resettlement Administration advanced $152 to Patrick. By September 1 he had already ginned and sold enough cotton to repay the loan. He made 4 more bales of cotton, 250 bushels of corn, and gathered 1 acre of peanuts, 6 acres of peas, 6 acres of velvet beans, 1½ acres of sweet potatoes and 1 acre of sorghum. His large family had vegetables out of a tremendous garden of 2 acres practically the whole year. In February 1936 Patrick’s total assets, including his household goods, were estimated by the resettlement office at $121.¹³⁵

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Despite these advances, the Benders were still apprehensive about their financial involvement with the government. They had been accustomed to their landlords and farmers taking a large percentage of their profits. When the various government projects arrived, the Benders did not understand “why it was that the white man did not take his usual heavy cut.”

Prairie Farms

In Macon County, close to the city of Tuskegee, the Prairie Farms homestead also housed black families in government project houses. Their experience differed from the homesteaders in Gee’s Bend. By 1935, the federal government had already successfully completed a variety of projects in the area, and thus had the skilled workers and

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136 Ibid.
organization in place. The federal government purchased land to enclose as a park (now Tuskegee National Forest), forcing the black former inhabitants out of their homes. In response, the Prairie Farms Homestead served the purpose of providing new homes for the dislocated black families. However, in a pattern that would be all too familiar, 400 families were dislocated and only 34 housing units were built in the Prairie Farms Homestead.

Most of the 34 families relocated from another New Deal project in nearby Tuskegee called the Tuskegee Planned Land Use Demonstration (TPLUD). The TPLUD offered blacks a chance to work on government projects, many of them heading the operations. While the New Deal plan included scattering the new home/farm areas around the county, the housing units ended up as part of a group homestead.137 Much of the area’s infrastructure, including roads and electricity, resulted from the TPLUD program.138

Prairie Farms encompassed approximately 3,100 acres. The land was obtained for $77,645 from two plantations, the George E. Dozier estate and the A. P. Tyson plantation. Although the project underwent several revisions, Prairie Farms ultimately contained 34 farms “between 39 and 134 acres, a 550-acre community pasture, the community center and school with 10 acres, a store, and a 6.63-acre home-site for the community manager.”139

As with other Alabama homesteads, the co-op was the center of activity. In Prairie Farms, the presence of a co-op store, “canning plant, feed and grist mill, hay baler,

139 Zabawa.
tractor and plows, mowing machine, and a cane mill” illustrated the needs of the homesteaders. Agricultural experts visited Prairie Farms to determine what crops would yield the best outcome.\(^{140}\) As to the scope of each plot of land and what products to plant, historian Robert Pasquill, Jr. noted, “the proper size of the farm was calculated based on soil productivity, rainfall, and the type of farming to be carried out.”\(^{141}\) Work animals, both on the farm and available for rent at the co-op, aided the homesteaders.

One positive difference between the white and black homesteads was that Prairie Farms also contained a school, the Tuskegee Institute Prairie Farms Laboratory School, costing approximately $18,000 to construct. Teachers were recruited from nearby Tuskegee Institute (Tuskegee University). The school, serving grades 1-9, incorporated home economics, “a farm shop with tools, a health center…a teachers’ cottage, a barn, and a playground that included two basketball courts, a volleyball court, a baseball field, and a track.” Both homestead children and the surrounding farm family children attended the school. The parent-teacher association provided hot lunches to the school children.\(^{142}\)

When not in use as a school, the building served as a community center. Religious services, medical clinics, and adult education classes were a few of the multi-purpose uses for the building. For all Alabama homesteads, the area extension office provided an invaluable service, as they taught lessons on how to preserve food to last throughout the winter. Classes held in the community center included “canning of fruits and vegetables, and the preservation of meats.”\(^{143}\)

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\(^{140}\) Ibid.
\(^{141}\) Pasquill, *Planting Hope*, 63.
\(^{142}\) Zabawa; Pasquill, *Planting Hope*, 67.
\(^{143}\) Pasquill, *Planting Hope*, 63.
The family houses, built by Gerard Swarthout Construction Company of Atlanta and the federal government, included three or four rooms and were wired with electricity. Along with a barn, stable, poultry house, vegetable house, and a pig pen, the homesteads also contained a well. Unlike the white homesteads (but exactly like the Gee’s Bend homesteads), Prairie Farms houses did not include bathrooms; rather, the property contained a sanitary privy. Despite this obvious omission, black families anxiously waited until they could move in to their new houses. Some families lived in the barns or on the property until their houses were constructed. Their leases (later mortgages) came with low payments and low interest rates. By the mid-1940s, many of the families in Prairie Farms owned their own homes.  

144 Ibid., 67-70.
Alabama was not the only southern state with federal housing for blacks. In Georgia, approximately 100 miles from Prairie Farms, the Flint River Farms in Macon County also contained a subsistence homestead built for the black community. The intended plan involved the homestead to be built in Fort Valley, which had been approved for settlement. However, the local whites petitioned and encouraged planners to cancel it. Instead, the project was re-evaluated and built in another area of the county. Flint River Farms was initiated in 1937 when the federal government purchased several large plantations and subdivided them into 107 farm units averaging 93 acres per unit. Each unit consisted of a new four or five room house, a barn, two mules, an outhouse, a chicken coop, and a smoke house. All featured electricity, bored wells, sanitary privies and fencing. The homestead, located in south Georgia, was exceptional in that the homestead was built by blacks for blacks and their input was important in the construction of the community. The Flint River Farms Resettlement Project was part of a New Deal Program that offered the opportunity for black farmers to become independent landowners—for many, this was the first time they owned land. As of 2003, sixteen of the original 106 families in the Flint River Farms Resettlement project still owned land in the settlement. Today, many of the descendants of the original participants still own the original farmland.145

Expected to serve as another model homestead, the Newport News Homesteads in Virginia were built “for blacks, by blacks.” Roosevelt’s aide, Louis Howe, wrote a letter describing his intentions: “I do not know what can be done to assure that the building of the Homestead Project is handled by Negro labor, but I think it would be a very fine thing if the whole project can speak for and of the ability of the Negro. The Committee and those interested hope very much that this policy will be carried out just insofar as possible.” 146

Almost everyone working on the Newport News Homestead was black, including the community manager, architect and chief construction engineer. Seeing blacks in nice, updated housing did not always set well with the neighboring white communities. In both

the Newport News and in Alabama’s Gee’s Bend homesteads, whites criticized programs that offered nice housing to blacks. Despite the homestead projects’ existing on a national scale, the South was perhaps more critical of federal revitalization programs than other areas of the country. One might point to the aforementioned issues of Jim Crow laws and lynching as reasons behind this sentiment. It is also quite likely that large government and northern interventions were particularly unwelcome as only three generations had passed since the Civil War. Such interventions threatened to make blacks “equal” – socially or economically.

There were similarities, however, between the white and black homesteads. Both offered new, more modern homes with solid structures. Both belonged to what one might now call the green movement in that building materials were located on the land. Trees were hewn from nearby timberland and local artisans crafted some of the construction. Regardless of the occupants’ race, most homes had a barn or shed, many with buildings for animals. All had some form of co-op office with groceries and dry goods available. Each homestead was appreciated and aided in creating a deep sense of community.

The disparities between the races were notable. While Prairie Farms had electricity but no bathroom, Gee’s Bend homes had neither. Geographically segregating the homesteads further, the white homesteads were built on sites around Birmingham or in the northern part of the state, while the two African American homesteads were located below Montgomery on former plantations. Almost exclusively, whites planned and built the homesteads throughout the country. One exception was Alabama’s Prairie Farms, in which black leaders and craftsmen were allowed to head certain aspects. This
was probably due to the location of Tuskegee nearby, which trained blacks in both academic and vocational professions.

These differences did not end with the interwar period. Author Jennifer Lynn Ritterhouse stated that inequalities are learned actions passed down through generations in an effort for whites to maintain their whiteness. She suggested that “whites’ greater pull with government agencies has meant that highways and garbage dumps have gone into black rather than white neighborhoods, preserving whites’—but not blacks’—property values.”\textsuperscript{147} While the home has been the center of most families’ lives, the inequalities in securing mortgages, land and respectable neighborhoods continues to plague African Americans.

On a local level, many Alabama families began new lives and contributed to new communities as a result of the New Deal, in particular the Resettlement Administration and subsistence housing programs. For Alabama’s African Americans at this time, the programs—while unequal and heavily segregated—were “probably by far the most significant thing that has happened to its families since emancipation.”\textsuperscript{148} As a racial experiment, both black and white homestead communities in Alabama persisted in their overall demographics. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, both Wilcox and Macon counties are at least seventy percent black, not including persons of mixed race. Yet the focus of the experiment did not include desegregation; but rather, self-sufficiency. While the white homesteads survived mainly due to their proximity to factories and industry near the city center, black homestead communities created their own progress, by working together and with the government for an overall better way of life.

\textsuperscript{147} Ritterhouse, 237.
\textsuperscript{148} Renwick C. Kennedy, “Life at Gee’s Bend.”
White Homesteads

Skyline Farms Homestead

Skyline Farms is the only white Alabama homestead not listed as an industrial community. Instead, the Skyline Farms Homestead was considered a farm community.\(^{149}\) Spurred by the “back-to-the-earth” and “back-to-the-land” movements, President Roosevelt desired the forgotten farm areas restructured to community farm projects, similar to the industrial subsistence homesteads. This was in line with the popular American belief of the 1920s that farming and rural life were idyllic.\(^{150}\)

Originally called the Cumberland Farms Project, the name of the homestead changed due to the proximity of the Tennessee homestead project, the Cumberland Mountain Homestead. Skyline Farms was located on 13,000 acres on Cumberland Mountain in northeast Alabama, in Jackson County. The county “contained large numbers of farm tenants and a few factory workers in scattered textile mills,” and was “almost entirely white.”\(^{151}\)

While the four Jefferson County homesteads were inhabited by lower-middle class families, Skyline Farms Homestead contained a large number of poor families who were on direct federal relief. 700 farmers applied for houses in Skyline Farms and only 238 were selected. The vast majority of the chosen homesteaders had the same background: white, from very poor families, sharecroppers or farm laborers, religious, illiterate, racists, and part of a large family. According to Flynt, “[o]ptimistic social

\(^{149}\) Conkin, 332-337.
\(^{151}\) Flynt, 306.
workers initially praised [the homesteaders] as ‘sturdy mountain people’ of high native intelligence, ability, and morality, ‘lacking only education and opportunity’.”

Homesteaders were provided with large lots, from 40 to 60 acres. With 181 homestead units, each homesteader had plenty of neighbors, despite the large acreage per farm. Homesteaders were provided with a house, outbuildings and farming equipment. An unusual aspect of Skyline Farms involved a pre-paid health care program and pre-paid veterinary association, which were subsidized by the federal government.

While all of the other Alabama homesteads were built by the Resettlement Administration (with assistance from other sources), the Skyline Farms homesteaders participated in the building of their houses. This was similar to an earlier homestead program in Tennessee, the Cumberland Mountain Homestead. In Tennessee, homesteaders lived in barns until their home was next in queue. When the Tennessee homesteader’s appointed time had arrived, the family aided in the building of their homes, providing an additional incentive for community and pride.

However, this excitement to construct one’s home was not shared with Skyline homesteaders. On December 1934, the first group of homesteaders was expected to appear at a meeting to begin the building process. Less than half of the anticipated attendees arrived as weather conditions were unusual, “snow, sleet, and rain fell that day.” Those who were in attendance were unsure of the project, and some of the attendees left the meeting, no longer involved in the homestead project. One homesteader

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152 Ibid., 307.
153 Campbell.
154 Ibid.
155 Cumberland Homesteads Newsletter, Fall 1995.
recalled, “We were all skeptical of such crazy doings, but anything was worth trying then.” ¹⁵⁶

The first day of construction became a key point in the homesteaders’ lives. The homesteaders endured a different sort of labor than they were used to in factories and farming, as “they wore the skin off their fingers and mixed their blood with the snow and concrete on that initial day of their new lives.” Homesteaders woke early and walked several miles to transportation to the worksite, laboring 10-hour days. They quickly completed temporary housing on their properties to alleviate the transportation time and provide them with more rest time. The homes, sawmill, and corrals for livestock were completed by the spring of 1935. ¹⁵⁷

Government officials who traveled with the WPA documented local arts and crafts in the South, and in Skyline Farms they found music. Members of the community formed the Skyline Farms Band, which eventually performed for President and Mrs. Roosevelt in Washington, D.C. The Skyline Farms Band marked the first time a traditional music ensemble performed in the White House for an American president. ¹⁵⁸

Skyline’s success was short-lived. Due to several crop failures and a defunct startup industry, the homestead once again fell on hard times by the early 1940s. As in many of the homesteads, accusations of socialization became rampant. Unfortunately, many people confused a strong sense of community in the homesteads with government-imposed socialism. Ultimately only two of the original farm families purchased their farm units. Currently, the school building is one of the few structures remaining from the early homestead days.

¹⁵⁶ Flynt, 307, 282.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid.
¹⁵⁸ Campbell; Flynt, 311-315.
Overall, the Skyline Farms project was a failure. The South was “a society committed to capitalist, free market institutions, institutions whose major advantage was purportedly their automatic promotion of efficiency, without need for intervention by regional planners.” 159 The Skyline area was probably a poor choice to start such a community, as they upheld these beliefs and rejected the collectivist ideals behind the homestead movement. Additionally, members of Congress also accused the area of socialist activities. The homesteaders also began arguing between themselves over the management of the project. By 1944, the government sold units to individuals buyers.


Bankhead Farms Homestead

Bankhead Farms is located in central Alabama, in Walker County. The cost for Bankhead Farms and the Jefferson County homesteads totaled $6,000,000, the largest amount for any industrial homestead region in the country.\textsuperscript{160} Senator Bankhead was from the area and used his political influence to initiate a homestead in Walker County.\textsuperscript{161} Bankhead almost certainly had first-hand knowledge of how the economic situation had deeply depressed his community, especially those of local farmers. From the initial discussions about the homesteads, the word “experimental” continued to arise—this was a project unlike any ever attempted by the federal government.\textsuperscript{162} To his credit, thousands of men in the state became temporary employees of the federal

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{161} Linn, et. al, \textit{Digging Out of the Great Depression}, 38.
\textsuperscript{162} Wager, 7, 17.
subsistence homesteads projects. It is quite fitting that the homestead in his home county was named after him.

A large tract of undeveloped land three miles away from Jasper (the Walker County seat) became the Bankhead Farms homestead. The 2,092 acres were originally owned by Jasper Land Company. Coal was located on the land, but not enough for mining purposes. Each homestead unit came with 12 to 37 acres, with most averaging 20 acres.\textsuperscript{163}

Bankhead Farms was the most expensive per-unit homestead in Alabama. The 100 units built cost approximately $1,046,420.80, or $10,464 per unit. This amount is double the amount expended for the African American homesteads and many thousands of dollars more than the other white homesteads.\textsuperscript{164} It is possible that Bankhead envisioned this homestead to be the centerpiece of both his state and the program he proposed.

Unlike the practice in most of the Jefferson County homesteads, the selection process in Bankhead Farms was made by the project manager.\textsuperscript{165} The first 24 homes were ready for occupancy by September 1, 1935, and by the end of the year, all units were occupied. However, the Bankhead Farms homestead observed one of the highest turnovers among the Alabama homesteads.\textsuperscript{166} Initially this might be assumed on the quality of construction as a contractor hired to build the first 24 houses in Bankhead and 60 in Palmerdale did not provide structures of lasting quality. The federal government directly took over building projects in the central Alabama region after problems arose.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 23-24.
\textsuperscript{164} Conkin, 332-337.
\textsuperscript{165} Wager, 40.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 58.
with the contract buildings. Similar to the efforts at Skyline Farms, shortly after settling in Bankhead several families took out a joint loan to start a hosiery business but it too failed. Another possible reason Bankhead Farms homesteaders left might have been a lack of farming education. In the spring of 1936, agricultural experts and the community manager met to conduct classes for homesteaders in basic agribusiness, including farm plans. A cooperative association was formed in 1937 for the promotion of the homestead rather than for store operations (as others did). In time, Bankhead Farms had home beautification programs and a strong demonstration club, organized by the Walker County home agent, with community members sharing their knowledge of agriculture and home economics.

Bankhead homestead families often had a coal mining background. At that time, however, work became intermittent and families were desperate for both food and work. The homestead provided plenty of land in which to supplement their food. Similar to the Jefferson County homesteads, the typical house included four to six rooms, running water, and a bathroom. In Bankhead Farms, water was electrically pumped from a well into the house, as was the case in Mt. Olive and Palmerdale. Both Bankhead Farms and the Jefferson County homesteads featured centrally located fireplaces to efficiently heat the most amount of space in the house. In addition to outbuildings and fencing, the Bankhead Farms homes also had septic systems.

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167 Ibid., 29.
168 Ibid., 121-124.
169 Ibid., 135.
170 Ibid., 115.
171 Ibid., 70, 75, 137.
172 Wager, 24.
173 Ibid., 16, 23, 31-32.
Like Skyline Farms, the Bankhead Farms area still exists, yet the sense of community is not as strong as those in Jefferson County. Bankhead Farms was built for the coal mining community, however, less than ten years after its inception; few miners lived in the homestead. Several reasons can be deduced, namely, distance from the mines, and interests not including agriculture, especially as a means to compliment the family income.\textsuperscript{174}


\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 213.
Conclusion

While both black and white homesteads served to enrich the livelihood of its citizens, most failed to develop a long-term sense of community. The experiments contained in the black homesteads proved more successful with education, despite construction disparities. The black homesteads served as a home to the relatively homeless. The white homesteads were custom built for whites and their needs. Yet neither the quality of construction nor amenities in the houses were factors in long-term ownership or a cohesive community. The most expensive homestead, Bankhead Farms, had the highest turnover. The poorest homestead, Gee’s Bend, contained families who have lived in the homestead houses for generations. Granted, they are quite cut off from major cities and industries, yet they continue to associate themselves with the New Deal community that started the wave of interest in the area. It does not seem that the black communities could have experienced more dire straits before the government agencies arrived, which might also attribute to their long-term success.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

The crisis of the Great Depression led to many experiments in the New Deal. In 1933, a tremendous burden fell on the new president and his cabinet to ease public fears while lifting the country out of economic depression. The subsistence homesteads were one of the solutions to this problem. New legislation was crafted and committees were formed to develop programs to aid individuals, particularly young families. This was the first time myriad assistance programs had been attempted, thus, the four Jefferson County subsistence homesteads were routinely described as “an experiment.”

While the initial homestead goals were met, in the decades since their completion the communities altered from their original purposes. For example, subsistence farming decreased as grocery stores and malls developed around the areas. However, on social and economic levels, these homesteads have, on average, proven to be successful experiments.

In looking back at the homesteads’ success, one must remember the word “experiment” was repeatedly used, as they were unproven, deemed by some to be communistic or socialistic, and for others an incredible waste of federal funding. Despite the naysayers, Roosevelt’s alphabet agency heads were liberal-minded and willing to take risks. Taking these risks meant the outcome might not turn out as planned; hence, these
For the most part, opinion surrounding the homesteads was overwhelmingly positive in the mid-1930s. On paper, the Jefferson County homesteads did well in the first decade. Several questions arise as to their success: Were they truly successful? Have they stood the test of time? Could this “experiment” be repeated? If the homesteads were so popular and well-received, why were only these built?

The answer can be explained with numerous theories, but three items are in retrospect the most important. First, America entered World War II in 1941, just a few years after the homesteads were built. As the world was changing, so too did the recovery efforts. The nation’s attention focused on the protection of the country and fighting enemies overseas. Second, with industrialization ramping back up, jobs were more plentiful. The lack of stable employment was not as much of an issue as men (who had worked in the recovery programs) found jobs in factories, particularly those benefitting the war effort. Finally, men were leaving the country to fight in the war, so the housing market was in a stagnant condition.

In further explaining the homesteads, several considerations should be made, which ultimately confirm the idea of long-term success. The considerations include economics, social issues, and the preservation of the houses.
Economics

Prior to the homesteads, Alabama was in dire straits as the state budget had been out of balance in 1927 and the March 1929 floods created havoc on the state economically.\textsuperscript{175} The loss of stable employment sent some families back to farm lands they or their families had worked prior to the industrial revolution. This “return to the land” mentality proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Maintenance of the farmsteads, obtaining the right equipment, animals, seeds, and labor were overwhelming obstacles. In this aspect, the subsistence homesteads were a very welcome opportunity for Alabama. With the construction of these experimental homesteads, the local economy improved. Employment boosted incomes and families were taken off relief roles. Families improved their living conditions. As part of the back-to-the-earth movement, homesteaders returned to something simple, something tangible and real, which appealed to many Americans.\textsuperscript{176}

Conversely, while the various farm rehabilitation programs were successful in Alabama, they failed to help enough families: “A total of 31,851 of the 273,773 farm families of the states were receiving FSA assistance on June 30, 1939.”\textsuperscript{177} Yet the New Deal, as a whole, lifted many families out of extreme poverty to a level they might not have been able to reach without the government’s assistance. According to historian Jennifer Lynn Ritterhouse, “[t]he New Deal also had a leavening effect, allowing some

\textsuperscript{175} Robert Pasquill, Jr., The Civilian Conservation Corps in Alabama: A Great and Lasting Good (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 3.
\textsuperscript{176} “A Homestead and Hope.”
\textsuperscript{177} Pearson, 2.
air into the South’s closed society even if New Deal programs were far from perfect in reaching and helping” other groups of people.¹⁷⁸

At a time when there was so much to improve, a moderate improvement was seen as a huge step forward. In the case of the homesteads, they were only a small part of the recovery program—but exceptional specimens—so they were one of the many projects viewed as a success. This success, however, came at a great cost to the government, as the expenditures extended to the program far outweighed the money obtained in rent, home ownership, and revolving lines of credit.

Today the Jefferson County homesteads are not self-sufficient in food production, but it is common to see small gardens on the properties. Farm animals and large plots of garden space are, unfortunately, infrequent. It is possible these activities are limited due to zoning restrictions. The four areas around the homesteads have become much more commercialized with restaurants and shopping. While these retail areas have taken away from the back-to-the-land movement, they have afforded more opportunities for the residents. As an experiment, the homesteads were successful in their economic purposes.

Social Issues

Families moved in and out of the homesteads. This changed the social makeup of each community. Today there are very few homes with original homesteaders, as most are no longer alive. Those who are still living are approaching 100 years in age. Yet their descendants often live in the same communities. The homestead with the longest continual population (families who started the community) is Mt. Olive. This might be

due to the lack of municipal incorporation and to the type of work the original inhabitants performed (mining).

Another relevant factor is race. The nation has a long history of segregation, particularly pertaining to government housing projects. While the back-to-the-farm movement was a nineteenth century invention, so was the incorporation of the city of Birmingham. Constructing subsistence homesteads in Alabama was controversial. The homesteads were meant to aid poor, young married couples. However, in the decade following their construction, middle-class white families moved into the homestead areas. The Jefferson County homestead areas are now considered middle-class housing. Over 86% of the Alabama subsistence homesteads units were built for white families only – 100% of the Jefferson County homesteads. (See Appendix A) Currently the white units are still overwhelmingly inhabited by white families. Meanwhile, the black homesteads remain almost completely black. This statement does not suggest that segregation is or was acceptable; rather, this thesis research indicates that by maintaining a similar background, homesteaders worked together to meet the goals of the overall community in a Jim Crow society.

Homesteaders preserved their identities in other ways as well. Streets and schools carry on the names of the homesteads, i.e. Greenwood Rd and Greenmor Rd in Greenwood. Even though homesteads no longer produce newspapers (like Cahaba’s Hub, see Fig. 21), they continue to celebrate their uniqueness, as in the preservation of the school and community center in Palmerdale, now the Palmerdale Homestead Community Center (see Fig. 8).
Some of the first milestones homeowners celebrated were the erection of a school, post office, and municipal building. These buildings signaled education for their children and established their presence in the county. For most of these communities, their struggle to obtain these vital resources had already been achieved within a decade of the homestead’s existence. The visual evidence of the homestead’s success is that all four of the Jefferson County homesteads are still standing and inhabited.

Preservation of the Houses

As America experienced several recessions and at least one other depression, one might wonder why these subsistence homesteads and/or greenbelt towns have not come back into vogue. The answer is that they have, although the federal government has been replaced with a company or an industrialist. Just as Henry Ford experimented with company towns prior to the creation of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, other industries have created their towns.\textsuperscript{179}

Company towns continued to flourish in the middle twentieth century with similar aspects: a commissary, doctor’s office, pharmacy, and niche specialty stores. Industrialists created their own communities, as they had done for years prior to the 1920s, in creating acreage through their land companies, houses through their construction companies, and mortgages through their banks and loan companies.

While little research could be found directly linking the subsistence homesteads to the more modern suburban movement, the evidence in this thesis supports that theory. Today’s suburbs are defined as community areas existing within commuting distance to a larger city. These are typically identified with their own schools, churches, and

\textsuperscript{179} Wager, 1.
municipalities. They were created as a result of massive transportation improvements in the latter half of the twentieth century. As roads expanded past the city limits, the natural progression of suburban developments began where electricity, water, sewage, and municipality framework already existed. This resulted in the creation of suburban pocket neighborhoods. As examples, the Cahaba Homestead has been incorporated into the city of Trussville and Greenwood into Bessemer. Current suburbs delineate their community identities further, as the formation of suburbs-within-a-suburb, such as Still Oaks and Misty Ridge in Trussville or Magnolia Ridge and Lexington Park in Gardendale. In Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956, historian Jason Scott Smith stated the New Deal programs “secured the foundations of forging a national market after 1945, spurred dramatic advances in economic productivity, built networks of roads and airports, drew up blueprints for national highways…foreshadowed the rise of the Sunbelt.” Historian Harvard Sitkoff stated that before the New Deal, “the national government had never engaged in public housing, except for the World War I emergency,” but after the New Deal, “it assured public housing a permanent place in American life.” Additionally, the blog urbanOhio.com presented an argument that placing subsistence homesteads within a ring of fifteen miles from the city center suggested “a new model for suburbanization for Dayton.” Clearly the suburb movement caught on, and much of the expansion of suburbs was started as a result of the homestead communities and the agencies involved in their creation.

Enduring Legacy

Nationally, there were 99 homestead communities at a cost of $108 million. Approximately $5 million was appropriated to the four Jefferson County subsistence homesteads. (see Appendix B) This amount did not include the clearing work or road and bridge construction performed by the CCC or storm drainage improvements by the CWA. The scale of design and completion was quite extraordinary.

The subsistence homestead experiment was designed to create loans and build subsistence communities. The original plan included a revolving fund so that the program could continue.183 With this plan, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) program evolved. Today many federal programs associated with home ownership and home loans directly trace their origins to the subsistence homestead programs.

Other federal programs affecting the homesteads included the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), Federal Art Project (FAP), and journalists in the RA. Without these agencies, researching the subsistence homesteads would have proved extremely difficult. The ability to read the first-hand accounts of people in the homesteads and the conditions surrounding their plights is immeasurable. But perhaps most intriguing are the photographs, posters, and artwork in both propaganda and instructional manuals during this period.

While Roosevelt had his share of opposition, his plan for recovery was ambitious. For some critics, the recovery projects were socialist-leaning. The communal feel of the recovery effort caused a number of his adversaries to write the media and speak wherever they might obtain an audience. His challengers felt the government had too much control. Critics suggested the homesteads were communistic, yet local Birmingham capitalists

183 “A Homestead and Hope.”
were heavily involved in the creation of the Jefferson County homesteads, which led to further developments in the private sector.

To the people living in the homesteads, these communities served as the start of a new life or a chance to start over. With some land, a few instructional classes, and a pioneering spirit, these individuals successfully accomplished their goals. Another aspect to owning these types of properties was the great fear that American would one day face a similar depression. Having the tools in place to survive another economic disaster was also a strong motivator, as described by Rexford Tugwell: “…[B]y adjusting our people to the resources which support them that any economic crisis in the future will not again have such a serious effect on human welfare.” In setting up a self-sustaining community based on living off the land, the next economic disaster might not hit families in the way the Great Depression did.184

Tugwell’s plan for subsistence homesteads to be convenient to work and comprised of lower middle class inhabitants has continued to date, as the demographics of all four homesteads has remained virtually the same. The intent that the houses were modern but inexpensive has also held throughout time, with the exception of newer homes interspersed and additions constructed to the original home. But this is, in itself, a sign of success. The families were able to continue working and improve their living conditions further. The fact that their children would also want to live in the community is another testament to the homestead experiment.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) built schools, post offices and various other government buildings, furthering a sense of local community. One government

184 “FHA to War on South’s Farm Slums,” The Birmingham News, n.d., clipping files, Department of Southern History, Birmingham Public Library.
document noted, the “suburban subsistence homesteads should afford a more wholesome way of living for the family than does the crowded city.” The conveniences of the city were transported to the homesteads by way of agencies such as the WPA. Obviously the success of the homesteads owes much to the agencies that continued to support the community, even after the houses had been built. 185

Before these homestead pioneers moved in to their new surroundings, large-scale engineering projects took place in clearing land and building infrastructures. The CCC not only completed highways and bridges, but also smaller scale projects, such as soil erosion prevention, land preservation, and harvesting timber. Many of these structures, infrastructures, and programs are still in place today. These programs, especially road-building, not only provided the framework for the subsistence homesteads, but also for later suburbs.

Despite the “experimental” label, these homesteads were planned communities. Every detail was carefully selected by professionals. There was also a strong amount of support on the local level. The homestead layouts were completed by local architects. Established landscapers helped in the designing of the community. A community store was placed at the head of the homestead and included, depending on the location, such amenities as a grocery store, communal animals to work the land, grain and feed stores and pharmacies. A building was erected in which a community center would serve as a multi-functional building. The Jefferson County homesteads have continually used these buildings for churches, polling places and schools.

Each building and home was inspected by government agencies upon completion. Stable, sturdy and long-lasting craftsmanship was important if the communities were to

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185 Circular No. 1.
survive. As proof of their success as an experiment, the vast majority of these houses are still standing. The first losses in each community were houses burning, not neglect or homes left in disrepair from owner to owner.186

Further evidence of success includes the government maintaining the homesteads after their construction. In their first decade, homesteaders were interviewed by government social workers. These social workers routinely polled the homesteaders and documented such things as their happiness in the homestead, whether anyone in the family had been ill, whether anyone had recovered as a result of the fresh air, and if there had been any crime. From the both the initial interview process and the follow-through, government social workers proved to be an integral part of the homestead process. The work performed by social workers would be interesting for future researchers to examine, particularly as related to the long-term residence in the homesteads.

The subsistence communities, “remain monuments to the reforming zeal of their creators…this creation, will remain vivid reminders of a time, not so long past, when Americans still could dream of a better, more perfect world and could so believe in that dream that they dared set forth to realize it, unashamed of their zeal.”187 This zeal carried homesteaders through hard economic times, new social situations, and perhaps the recognition of their dreams of homeownership fulfilled.

The story of the subsistence homesteads is one of the homes and the people who inhabited them. Their struggles both before and after obtaining home ownership were aided by government programs. Although these programs did not elevate everyone, or even everyone in the South, their presence in Alabama truly lifted many citizens out of

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186 Digging Out of the Great Depression (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Historical Society, 2010), 38.
187 Conkin, 7.
their destitution, providing them with safe, well-built houses in modern, convenient
neighborhoods. Their legacy is the growth of new communities and the continued sense
of identity in their original homestead.
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“State Award Trebled For Homesteads: PWA Increases Funds For Model Colony Homes To $6,250,000.” *The Birmingham Post-Herald*. May 16, 1935.


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**Films**

*The Plow that Broke the Plains*. Directed by Pare Lorentz. Resettlement Administration, 1936.

*The River*. Directed by Pare Lorentz. Farm Security Administration, 1938.
Online – Primary and Secondary

Arthurdale Heritage, Inc. “New Deal Homestead Communities.”


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Taft Papers. Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library.


**Miscellaneous - Secondary**


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APPENDIX A
DIVISION OF FUNDS ALLOCATED TO ALABAMA HOMESTEADS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
<th>Unit Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bankhead Farms</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>$1,046,420.80</td>
<td>10,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cahaba</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>$2,760,610.47</td>
<td>9,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gee’s Bend*</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>$418,505.30</td>
<td>4,185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>$827,835.27</td>
<td>9,974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mount Olive</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>$618,162.84</td>
<td>8,242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmerdale</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>$938,865.08</td>
<td>9,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prairie Farms*</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>$201,683.79</td>
<td>5,932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skyline</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>$1,230,333.06</td>
<td>6,797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>962</strong></td>
<td><strong>$8,042,416.61</strong></td>
<td><strong>$64,418</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AVERAGE</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1,005,302.08</strong></td>
<td><strong>$8,052</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of the Alabama homesteads and their total cost. Compiled by author. Source: Conkin, 332-337.
* Labeled as “Negro” homestead.
APPENDIX B
BREAKDOWN OF FUNDS FOR HOMESTEADS IN UNITED STATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>UNITS</th>
<th>COST</th>
<th>STATE</th>
<th>UNITS</th>
<th>COST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>962</td>
<td>$8,042,416.61</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>$1,332,961.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>$922,407.45</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>$3,402,382.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>1,291</td>
<td>$8,695,568.94</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>$677,725.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>$394,542.04</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>$5,861,849.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>$2,499,629.99</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>$213,172.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>$4,718,000.85</td>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>$11,910,627.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>$554,745.53</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>$2,519,469.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>$157,279.94</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>$2,527,835.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>$216,189.87</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>$218,660.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>$1,391,249.84</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>$3,267,345.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>$2,165,760.85</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>$4,638,112.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland (D.C.)</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>$13,701,817.17</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>$2,414,021.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>$1,739,096.62</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>$194,097.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>$1,235,372.85</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>$6,331,335.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>$2,085,525.81</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>$10,884,842.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>$976,055.87</td>
<td>TOTAL ALL STATES</td>
<td>10,938</td>
<td>$108,095,328.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>$1,644,275.77</td>
<td>TOTAL SOUTH *</td>
<td>5,749</td>
<td>$50,000,540.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*TOTAL SOUTH = AL, GA, MS, FL, TN, KY, AR, LA WV, VA, NC, SC
If the D.C. area were added, the TOTAL SOUTH would be 6,639 units at $63,702,357.34.
NOTE: AK, CO, CT, DE, HI, ID, KA, ME, MA, NV, NH, NY, OR, OK, RI, UT, VT, WY did not have New Deal communities.
List of States with New Deal Communities. Compiled by author. Source: Conkin, 332-337.