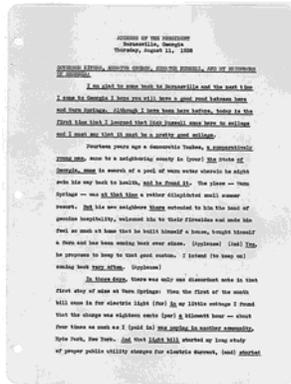


Let There Be Light: President Franklin D. Roosevelt Brings the Rural Electrification Administration to Georgia

By Kahlil G. Chism

“And so, my friends, it can be said with a good deal of truth that a little cottage at Warm Springs, Georgia, was the birthplace of the Rural Electrification Administration.”

- Franklin D. Roosevelt, Address at Barnesville, GA, Aug. 11, 1938



Franklin D. Roosevelt's Address at Barnesville, GA, 08/11/1938



REA Dedication Ceremony, Barnesville, GA, 08/11/1938

August 11, 1938, was a busy day for President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR). After delivering the commencement address at the University of Georgia, in Athens, Roosevelt made his way to the campus of Gordon Military College, in Barnesville, GA. He was in Barnesville to give a speech at the dedication of their new Rural Electrification Administration cooperative (see document: *Address at Barnesville, GA, 08/11/1938*).

The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) was essentially a federal loan subsidy program that assisted groups of rural farmers with building and running their own electrical distribution systems. Roosevelt created the REA via Presidential Executive Order 7037, which he signed on May 11, 1935 – exactly three years and three months prior to the day of his address in Barnesville. Along with other New Deal “alphabet soup” initiatives such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), and establishment of the Social Security Administration (SSA), the REA had a positive economic impact on many Georgians during the years of the Great Depression and beyond.

The CCC was a work relief program meant to curb Depression-era unemployment, the AAA attempted to raise the prices of certain crops by paying farmers to reduce surpluses by curtailing the planting of those crops, and the SSA provided insurance against poverty due to old age, unemployment, and disability. One of the more successful and long-lived of these New Deal initiatives was the establishment of the REA, which still exists today, but is now called the Rural Utilities Service.

While 90% of urban households had electricity by 1930, only 10% of rural households had power. Small towns usually remained in the dark because electric service providers found it too costly to invest in creating an electrical infrastructure in areas where residents were stretched far apart. When providers did offer electric service to rural areas, they often did so at prices much higher than those in the cities. This dynamic was expressed succinctly in FDR's speech before the 20,000 people gathered to hear him in Barnesville:

In those days, there was only one discordant note in that first stay of mine at Warm Springs: When the first of the month bill came in for electric light (for) in my little cottage I found that the charge was eighteen cents (per) a kilowatt hour – about four times as much as I (paid in) was paying in another community, Hyde Park, New York. And that light bill started my long study of proper public utility charges for electric current, (and) started in my mind the whole subject of getting electricity into farm homes throughout the United States.¹

President Roosevelt's first visit to Georgia came in 1913, when he was a member of the U. S. Navy on assignment in Brunswick. After he contracted polio in August 1921, Roosevelt heard about the rejuvenating waters of Warm Springs, GA, and made his first visit to Warm Springs in September 1928.² By the time he dedicated the REA cooperative in Barnesville in 1938, he was a farm owner and part-time resident of Warm Springs.

In addition to stressing the importance of bringing electricity to all parts of Georgia, some of the other issues Roosevelt addressed during this speech were the South's weak economy, the local Senate primary race, the importance of cooperation between state and national governments, the legislative process, and the state of democracy around the world.

So what was life like in rural Georgia before the advent of electricity? According to one native Georgian, Jimmy Carter, "My life on the farm during the Great Depression more nearly resembled farm life of fully 2,000 years ago than farm life today."³ Carter doesn't recall knowing of any rural families that had electric lights until the REA program came along in the late 1930s. "An almost unbelievable change took place in our lives when electricity came to the farm," Carter recalls. "The continuing burden of pumping water, sawing wood, building fires in the cooking stove, filling lamps with kerosene, and closing the day's activity with the coming of night . . . all these things changed dramatically."⁴ Jimmy Carter's father, Earl Carter, Sr., became one of the first directors of the Plains, GA, REA cooperative when Jimmy was about thirteen years old.

By 1939, the cost of a mile of rural electric line had dropped from \$2,000 to \$600, the REA had helped to establish 417 cooperatives that served 288,000 households, and rural households with electricity had risen to 25%.⁵ Fully aware of the Rural Electrification Administration's successes by the time he arrived in Barnesville for the dedication ceremony, FDR wrapped up his speech by stating, "we as a nation are moving steadily and surely toward a better way of living for all of our people. This electrification project is a symbol of our determination to attain that objective."⁶

Note:

To view photographs, murals, and other media documenting the work of the REA, please visit the following online exhibit from the National Archives, titled *A New Deal for the Arts*: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/work_pays_america.html

¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt's *Address at Barnesville, GA, 08/11/1938*. FDR-PPF: Papers as President, President's Personal File, 1933 – 1945. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library [ARC#197820].

² For a brief history of Roosevelt's visits to Warm Springs, GA, see *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2727&sug=y>

³ Carter, Jimmy. *Why Not The Best? Why One Man Is Optimistic About America's Third Century*. Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1975.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The New Deal Network: <http://newdeal.deri.org/tva/tva10.htm>

⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt's *Address at Barnesville, GA, 08/11/1938*. FDR-PPF: Papers as President, President's Personal File, 1933 – 1945. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library [ARC#197820].

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Standards Correlations

I. Georgia Performance Standards

- **SS8H8:** The student will analyze the important events that occurred after World War I and their impact on Georgia.

d. Discuss the effect of the New Deal in terms of the impact of the Civilian Conservation Corps, Agricultural Adjustment Act, *rural electrification*, and Social Security.

II. National History Standards

- **Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929 - 1945)**
Standard 2A. Demonstrate an understanding of the New Deal and the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

III. National Standards for Civics and Government

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- **Standard III.B.1.** Evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues regarding the purposes, organization, and functions of the institutions of the national government.

IV. Constitutional Connection

- This lesson relates to the duties and powers of the president and Congress as set forth in the Preamble, in Article I, Section 8, Paragraph 18, and in Article II, Section 3, Paragraph 1, that resulted in measures to provide for national relief from the economic disaster of the Great Depression.

Suggested Teaching Activities

1. Vocabulary Development

Provide students with a copy of *FDR's Address at Barnesville*, and the accompanying essay. Ask them to locate the following words in the speech and essay and to use classroom resources (dictionary, thesaurus, textbook) to define each term: *dilapidated*, *discordant*, *manifold*, *state sovereignty*, *impair*, *panaceas*, *attain*, *commencement*, *cooperative*, *subsidy*, *curtailing*, *disparity*.

2. Document Analysis (see *document analysis worksheets*)

Direct students to study the featured documents and then lead them in a class discussion about the documents using questions such as the following:

- What type of document is it?
- When was the document created?
- Who do you think created the document?
- For what audience was the document created?

3. Essay Review Questions

- Why did FDR tell the crowd that Warm Springs, GA, was the birthplace of the REA? What relationship did FDR have to Warm Springs?
- What percentage of urban households had power by 1930?
- What percentage of rural households had power by 1930?

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- According to the essay, what factors contributed to the disparity between electrified and non-electrified homes in 1930? Quote from the document when providing your answer.
 - Name three issues besides rural electrification that FDR addressed in his speech to the citizens of Barnesville.
 - Name two other New Deal initiatives begun by FDR.
 - Do you consider the REA to have been an effective government agency? Why or why not? Quote from the documents to support your answer.