



West Virginia's New Deal Education Experiment

Lexington, KY—As part of the New Deal, the Roosevelt administration established several communities around the United States throughout the 1930s to bolster economic development. Arthurdale, West Virginia, was the first. The small town was an ideal location to launch the experiment due to Appalachia's underdevelopment and persistent poverty which had been exacerbated by the Great Depression. The community was designed to allow displaced coal miners and their families a chance to start anew by farming the land, but the real center of the community was not to be economic production in the field, but educational development in the classroom.

In *The Arthurdale Community School: Education and Reform in Depression Era Appalachia*, educational historian Sam F. Stack Jr. explores the history of the Appalachian community and the school at its core. He traces the school's origins and places it within the larger context of both the progressive educational movement and the New Deal. He also examines the influence of Elsie Ripley Clapp (1879–1965), the first director of the school and community affairs at Arthurdale. Stack's evaluation of this forgotten chapter of Appalachian history reveals the school's lasting legacy and influence on the community and region.

The Arthurdale Community School was founded on the progressive education principles popularized by philosopher John Dewey. His essay "The School as a Social Center" helped frame the argument that education should be a "genuine form of community life" instead of merely a place for lessons. Adherents to his ideas believed that education was primarily a social function, so schooling should be designed as "preparation for citizenship." Under the leadership of Clapp, a student of Dewey, Arthurdale sought to embody these progressive education principles to reshape Appalachia.

Stack explores the relative successes and failures of Clapp's progressive education experiment in the heart of Appalachia. The focus in the classroom was community building, and a curriculum heavy on the rich heritage of Appalachian music, crafts, and folklore helped instill the sense of identity Arthurdale needed. The lessons, however, were positive to the point of idealism, and critics have noted that progressive educators failed to confront social injustices such as racism and political corruption in the classroom. Ultimately, the experiment at Arthurdale was short lived. With World War II looming, public opinion shifted away from progressive domestic projects, and Arthurdale was defunded in 1941.

As we constantly strive to reevaluate our educational system, we seldom look to past reformers to inform our decisions moving forward. Stack's work provides a historical understanding of the Arthurdale School that can enhance our understanding of contemporary educational practices. By comparing the citizenship-minded approach of the progressive school movement with the modern educational system, *The Arthurdale Community School* makes a fascinating historical experiment relevant to contemporary policy.

Sam F. Stack Jr. is professor of social and cultural foundations at West Virginia University. He is the author of *Elsie Ripley Clapp (1879–1965): Her Life and the Community School* and coauthor of *Teachers, Leaders, and Schools: Essays by John Dewey*, which won the 2012 American Educational Studies Critics Choice Award.

THE ARTHURDALE COMMUNITY SCHOOL EDUCATION AND REFORM IN DEPRESSION ERA APPALACHIA Sam F. Stack Jr.

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