

Cumberland Homesteads

Essential Question: What were the successes and failures of the Cumberland Homesteads?

The Cumberland Homesteads were created from one of the lesser known New Deal programs, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads. The program was originally part of the National Industrial Recovery Act, but eventually became part of the Farm Security Administration. The program was based on the “back to the land” philosophy which said that rural living was better than city living for the poor. The movement was based on relief work begun by the American Friend’s Service Committee in mining areas of West Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. Eleanor Roosevelt was an admirer of the group’s work. Her interest and support would prove vital to the success of the Subsistence Homesteads project.

The Subsistence Homesteads project targeted three groups of people for assistance. Part-time farmers near industrial sites, farmers resettled from poor farmlands and stranded communities. Stranded communities were isolated communities of miners or timber workers who had been out of work since the economic collapse in the 1920’s. This was the most controversial aspect of the program. Critics argued that the communities would never be self-supporting because they were too far from job opportunities. Cumberland Homesteads was one of four stranded communities in the program.

The idea behind the program was give families homes and land on which to raise vegetables, chickens, cows and hogs to provide for their basic needs and supplement their income while working at other jobs. Homesteaders were also expected to work for the good of the community. Women were strongly encouraged to their skills at handcrafts, especially weaving, to help support their families.

In 1934, the government purchased 11,600 acres of land in Cumberland County for the project. Relief workers from the Civil Works Administration (CWA) began clearing the land while the agency screened applications for homesteaders. Over 2,500 applications were received for 350 planned homesteads. Applicants had to be American citizens, over 21 years of age, have enough income to make payments on the homestead, but not enough income to receive a home loan from a bank. The homesteaders were also expected to have a strong work ethic and be willing to work not only on their own homes, but also on community projects.

The community and the buildings within it were planned by architect, William Macy Stanton. The community had fifteen different homes designs. The homes were made from sandstone and wood processed on the homestead site. The plans also called for the homes to have electricity and indoor plumbing. This proved controversial. Senator Byrd of Virginia thought that electricity, refrigerators and indoor toilets were too expensive for county people. Senator McKellar of Tennessee complained that homes were stone mansions and that the resettlement workers lived in nicer homes than he did. Support from Eleanor Roosevelt insured that the homes had both electricity and indoor plumbing. In

addition to the homes, there were a number of community buildings including an elementary school, high school, administration building and water tower, two factories, a cooperative store, and loom house.

On July 28, 1939 a ceremony was held to mark the completion of the project, though only 251 of the planned 350 had been completed. The government began transferring ownership of the homes to the homesteaders. In 1947, ownership of the schools, and administration building were transferred to the county when the last house transfer was completed.

Opinions differ as to the success of the project. Some sources claim that the project was a success because it gave the homesteaders a means of survival during difficult times as well as building a sense of kinship within the community. Others claim that the industrial and agricultural cooperatives failed due to mismanagement at the local and federal levels. Families were left with no jobs and poor farmland that was prone to erosion. It is claimed that many simply moved away. In either case, the project did generate much needed jobs for hundreds of people during the dark days of the Great Depression.

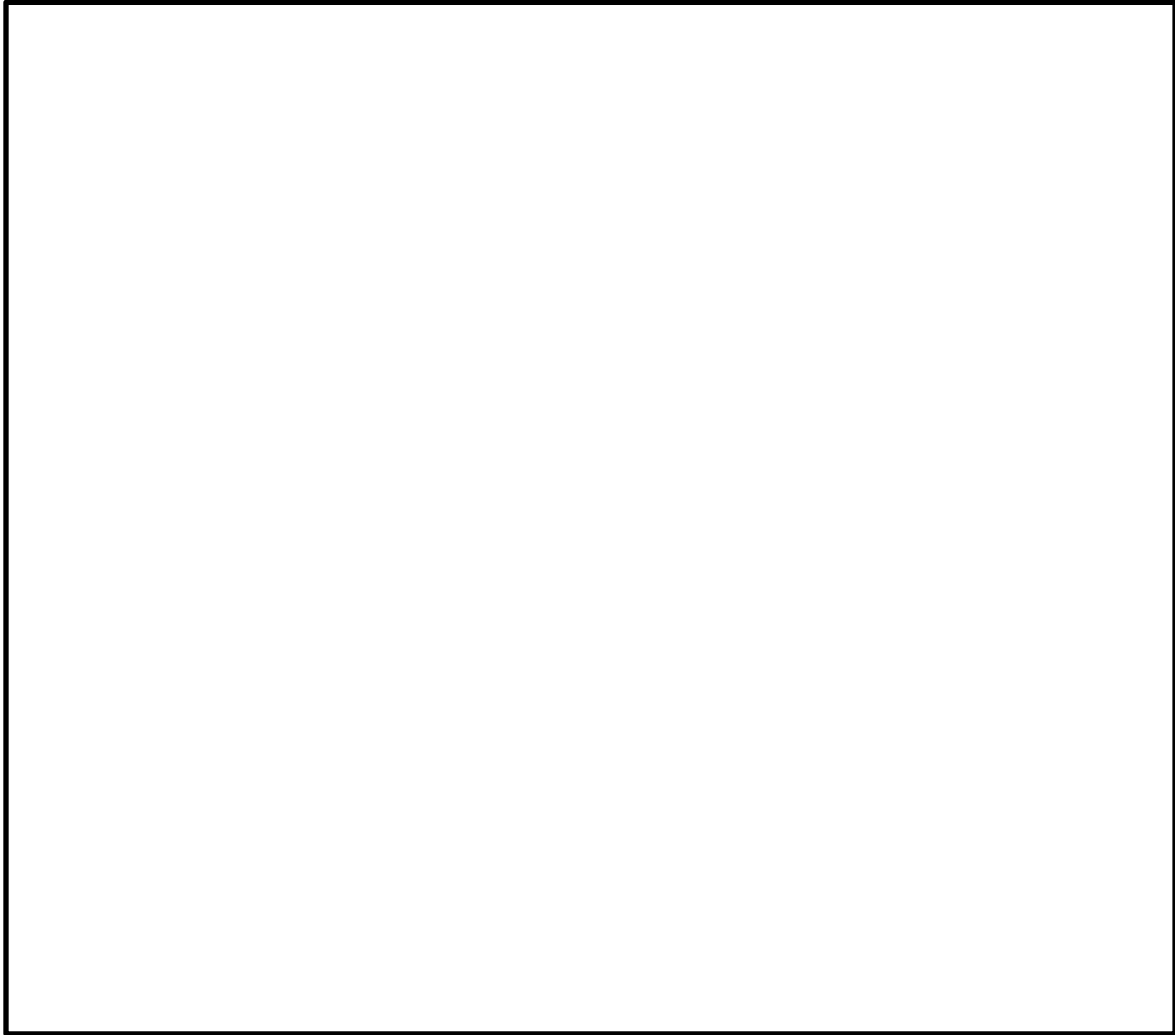
Source: Straw, Liz. "Cumberland Homesteads, A Resettlement Community of the Depression." *Nps.gov*. National Park Service, 2008. Web. 27 July 2014, <
<http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/sero/appalachian/sec8.htm>

Tabler, Dave. "Indoor privies for country people at Cumberland Homesteads." *Appalachianhistory.net* Appalachian History, 2010. Web. 27 July 2014. <
<<http://www.appalachianhistory.net/2010/05/indoor-privies-for-country-people-at.html>>

"History of the Cumberland Homesteads." *Cumberlandhomesteads.org*. Cumberland Homesteads Tower Association, 2010. Web. 27 July 2014. <
<http://www.cumberlandhomesteads.org/history.html>>

Cumberland Homesteads

Create a poster advertising the homesteads constructed in the Cumberland Plateau. Be sure to include text in the poster that outlines some specifics of the program.



Do you think that this housing program was a good idea? Why or Why Not?
