

Its Utopian Experiment Is Long Over, but Roosevelt Remains

Monmouth County Borough Survives Long After End of Depression-Era Experiment

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Updated Aug. 21, 2014 10:22 p.m. ET

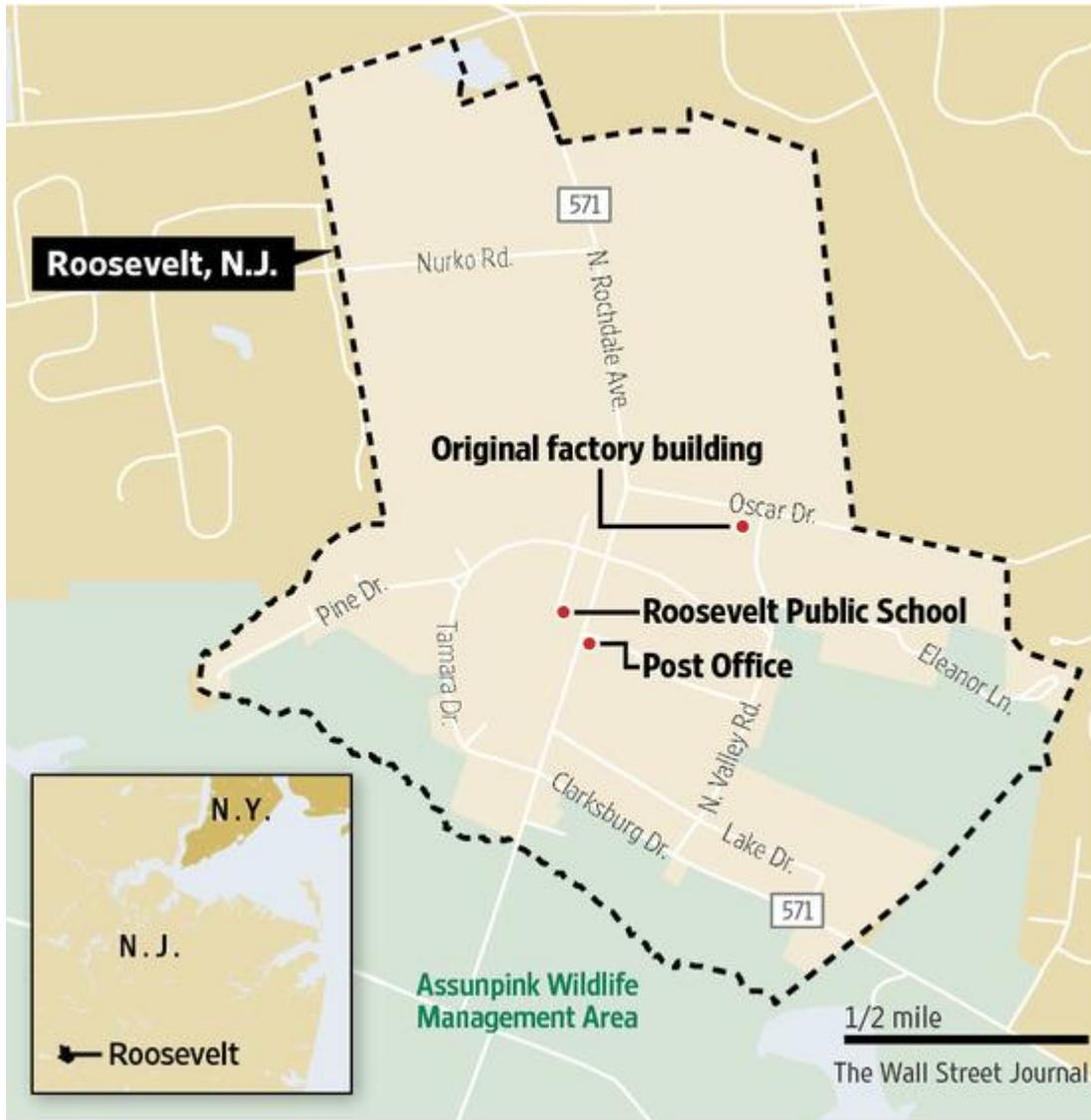


A mural painted in 1936-37 by Ben Shahn in Roosevelt Public School is viewed by Mike Ticktin, a Roosevelt councilman and borough historian. *Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal*

The small New Jersey borough of Roosevelt was established as a Depression-era experiment in communal living and work, intended as a haven where urban dwellers—mostly Jewish garment workers from New York City, about 55 miles away—could begin anew in a rural setting.

The utopian vision for the 1.9-square-mile community didn't last as the collective farm and its clothing factory went out of business within a few years. But the Monmouth County borough, today with fewer than 900 people, has managed to survive, fighting off development and preserving many of its original homes, encouraging artists and writers to take up residence and maintaining a belief in the value of an active citizenry.

"Roosevelt is a model of how a municipality can function," said Mike Ticktin, the borough historian and a councilman. "If somebody wants to play a part to make things better, they have ample opportunities to do so."



The environment was a prime design feature of the new community and some streets today are lined on both sides by native brush, plants and mature trees that tower over the asphalt. Many of Roosevelt's quirky houses with flat roofs, contrasting with cookie-cutter subdivision houses in some nearby towns, are nestled among trees and lush lawns.

First known as Jersey Homesteads and renamed after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the borough was incorporated in 1937 under a New Deal program intended to provide healthier living and working settings for city dwellers. On their new homesteads, residents could grow their own food and do work in the factory and local shops to supplement their income.

"The people felt they could have a better life in quieter, more natural surroundings," said Mr. Tickin.

A commission that included notables such as Albert Einstein was awarded \$500,000 in federal funding for buying land and other uses, according to historical data at Rutgers University. The commission raised another \$100,000 from prospective residents and set aside space for farmland, a school, stores, a factory building, a chicken yard, a water-treatment plant and 200 homes on half-acre plots. Worker cooperatives were organized to run the farm, the stores and the factory.



Helen Barth, who moved to Roosevelt as a toddler, in her backyard *Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal*

The distinctive design of many of the borough's houses were the work of Alfred Kastner, who took architectural ideas from the German Bauhaus movement in the early 20th century. For the pastoral setting of the town, he was influenced by the garden city movement, a British-born urban-planning philosophy that featured greenbelts and town cooperatives.

"Part of the design was to get a feel of infinite space. You felt tucked into nature. You back up into nature," Mike Hamilton, a former mayor of Roosevelt, said of the wide expanse of trees and shrub that surround the homes.

An assistant to Mr. Kastner during the period was architect Louis I. Kahn, whose later design work included the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park on New York's Roosevelt Island.

Artist Ben Shahn received a commission under a New Deal program for a mural that depicts the history of the town, from immigrants arriving at Ellis Island to the founders contemplating the borough's blueprint. The well-known work stands in a main hall of the school and features cameos within the mural such as Albert Einstein.

Mr. Shahn and his wife, Bernarda Bryson, moved into town in 1939. "They decided to come here temporarily for a year or so. The houses were inexpensive and they were very nice houses," said their sculptor son, Jonathan, who still maintains a studio in the former factory building and created an FDR bust that now stands in front of the school.

Other creative people were also drawn to the town, such as painter Gregorio Prestopino and Robert Emmett Mueller, an artist, writer and flutist whose eclectic body of work is being acquired by Monmouth University.

"It was very artsy," said Mr. Mueller, now 89 years old, who moved to Roosevelt in 1954. "Close-knit. We would go from one house to another. It was a very lively scene musically and artistically."

The grand experiment in Roosevelt collapsed within a few years of the first families moving in, as personality clashes, bureaucratic wrangling and economic troubles contributed to the failure of the factory and farm. In later years, development threatened to transform the community with proposals for hundreds of senior-housing units and single-family homes.

But acres of woods and shrubs were preserved. Roosevelt was listed on the state and national registries of historic places in the 1980s.

A few descendents of the early families in Roosevelt have remained. "I am extremely proud of the town's heritage. I love this community," said Helen Barth, whose parents moved to the borough when she was a toddler in 1936 and who is still a resident.



Turkeys crossing Roosevelt's Eleanor Lane *Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal*