

NORVELT

WORKER'S HAVEN AND MISSED OPPORTUNITY

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ABSTRACT: Norvelt is a New Deal subsistence homestead community in western Pennsylvania established to provide secure and comfortable homes, access to healthy food, and an affirming cooperative community to unemployed miners and their families. It succeeded in these aims, but its virtual exclusion of African American residents affirmed the racial prejudice and discrimination that permeated much of the New Deal. Creating an integrated community would have met with great resistance from white residents, who voted to exclude African American applicants, and from powerful regional voices already suspicious of what they considered to be a socialist experiment. Accommodating racial prejudice perpetuated injustices that denied African Americans access to opportunities available to whites.

KEYWORDS: New Deal, Pennsylvania, Roosevelt, subsistence homestead, race, Norvelt

Norvelt is a small New Deal community in Southwest Pennsylvania, named for EleaNOR RooseVELT. In the 2016 presidential elections, 66 percent of Norvelt voters cast their ballot for Donald Trump.¹ While these figures are in line with those of southwest Pennsylvania, with the exception of Pittsburgh and the area around it, they stand in sharp contrast to the voting patterns registered by the first generations who settled Norvelt, the grandparents and great-grandparents of many of the community's current residents. Early Norvelt inhabitants were grateful to the Roosevelt administration, especially to Eleanor Roosevelt, for providing a path out of the poverty and despair that

engulfed many in the destitute coal-mining communities dotting the area.² They were among the lucky ones selected to join the federally sponsored settlement and offered the prospect of building or rebuilding their lives in less precarious, more advantageous surroundings (see fig. 1).

Norvelt began in 1934 as a project of the federal government's Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH). The Subsistence Homestead program sought to create stable and affirming communities that included small-scale farming and modest but modern and comfortable homes. Before it became subsumed within the Resettlement Administration, the DSH established thirty-four communities distributed across many states.³ The program largely succeeded in its aims to provide secure housing, a regular supply of healthy food, and tight community bonds. But the program offered no challenge to existing racial prejudice and segregation, and thus missed a significant opportunity to accelerate positive social change (fig. 2).

Norvelt provided 250 families with the opportunity and means to radically and positively transform their lives. In just a few years, most of the original inhabitants went from being unemployed or underemployed miners, living in houses owned by mining companies that lacked running water and plumbing, often short of cash to repay the company store where they had purchased food and other necessities, to being inhabitants of a cooperatively-run community, living in solidly built homes, all of which had indoor plumbing, electricity, and central heating.⁴



FIGURE 1 Norvelt, Westmoreland Homesteads. Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania. Looking west. Westmoreland County. Carl Mydans, photographer, February 1936. Source: Farm Security Administration photos, Library of Congress. <http://cdn.loc.gov/service/pnp/fsa/8b27000/8b27200/8b27205v.jpg>.

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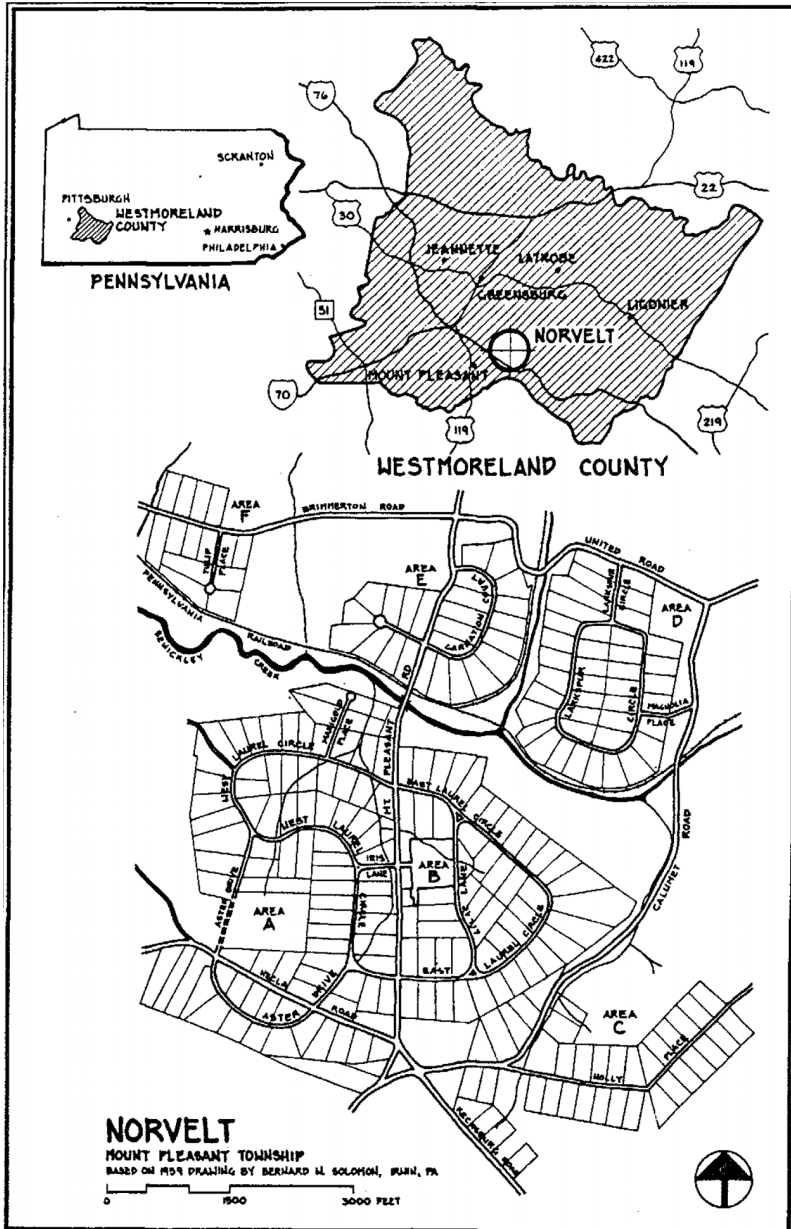


FIGURE 2 Map of Norvelt. From Alison K. Hoagland and Margaret M. Mulrooney, *Norvelt and Penn-Craft, Pennsylvania: Subsistence-Homestead Communities of the 1930s*, Historic American Buildings Survey/ Historic American Engineering Record (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1991), 24.

But in one important way, Norvelt failed significantly. Its formation, settlement, and success did not challenge the racist ideology and practices that plagued the United States so powerfully in the 1930s, as they do to a lesser but still significant extent today, close to eighty years later. In fact, in some ways they served to reinforce them. Of the 250 families who first inhabited Norvelt, 249 were white. The sole black family who lived there, Helen and Chauncey White and their children, only gained admittance to the community after the Roosevelt administration remanded a decision by white community members to exclude African Americans.⁵ Had the Roosevelt administration taken similar stances in a broad range of New Deal programs, it may have increased progress toward greater racial equality.

This article argues that Norvelt offers an important case study of how the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal programs failed to overcome, challenge, or even confront white supremacy. This failure further reinforced the nation's racial hierarchy and the social and cultural biases underlying them. An example of the legacy of that failure is in the decision of the majority of Norveltters to vote for Donald Trump in 2016, just as it is in the alarming upsurge in white supremacy across the United States.⁶

Historians have recently highlighted the bargain that Roosevelt struck with southern Democrats to gain their support for New Deal programs that critics denounced as socialistic. In exchange for southern congressional support for many of his economic initiatives, Roosevelt agreed to allow New Deal legislation to largely exclude from their benefits one of the segments of American society most in need of opportunity, the African American population. As recently as 2013 Ira Katznelson identified this commitment to white privilege to be "the most overlooked theme in almost all previous histories of the New Deal."⁷ His own history does a great deal to correct this neglect, as do works by Thomas Sugrue and some others. Sugrue notes that New Deal housing policies discriminated against African Americans more than any other Depression era legislation or policy initiative.⁸

The authors also argue that, while Norvelt failed to confront endemic racism, it did challenge directly some critical values that undergirded the existing capitalist economic order. In contesting the competitive and individualistic basis of market capitalism, Norvelt offered what many considered an appealing alternative to the ethos that pitted individuals against each other. This experiment in cooperation generated strong opposition from the region's economic and cultural elite, proved that it was possible to seek alternatives to some of capitalist society's fundamental organizing principles, and makes acquiescence in racism even more tragic.

New Left historians argue that the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal did not constitute a revolution so much as avert one. They see that the Great Depression offered opportunities to restructure significantly the nation's economic and social orders that the New Deal passed up in favor of saving those very structures that enabled oppression and inequality. In this telling, it was not so much that Roosevelt failed to achieve his aims as that he reached for too little at the outset.⁹ In many ways Norvelt's story affirms this perspective, especially as it pertains to race and individualism. But the story also contains elements of great success against strong resistance from powerful forces.¹⁰ New Deal reformers did identify competition and individualism as foundations of the current economic and social order, and they did seek through the Subsistence Homestead program to raise the opposing values of cooperation and social cohesion. These efforts challenged the existing order, and they sparked intense opposition from among those who had benefited from that order.¹¹

At its core the Subsistence Homestead program contained a tension between the value of "individualism" inherent in both US cultural history and capitalism and the "cooperative ethos" that the New Deal sought to strengthen in counterbalance. The story of Norvelt encapsulates these tensions and allows us to explore how they played out in one New Deal community. Norvelt certainly succeeded in many of its fundamental aims and achieving those goals highlights elements of the Roosevelt legacy that are important to remember. Norvelt residents escaped poverty's crushing oppression. They lived in modest but comfortable homes, consumed healthy and readily available food, and forged strong attachments to local and national communities. But in the process of achieving these aims, individualism largely surpassed cooperation. Today two features distinguish Norvelt from some similar, small communities in the region, especially former coal patches: the immense pride and knowledge Norvelt descendants (those who live there as well as those who moved away) have in their community's history and their deep gratitude toward the Roosevelts and the New Deal.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF NORVELT

The most visible aspects of Norvelt are the 254 houses that the residents helped to build. Norvelt was one of the Subsistence Homestead program's largest developments. The DSH hired local architects to design the houses

for each community. Paul Bartholomew was a prominent architect who worked out of the Westmoreland County seat of Greensburg, very close to Norvelt. He called the houses that he designed Pennsylvania farmhouses, but they more resemble Cape Cod designs to most observers.

Families lived in one of five home designs ranging in size between 750 and 900 square feet, all slightly larger than the coal-patch houses in which many had lived before. Families with multiple children cared about the square footage, especially in the cold winter months that kept members indoors for such long stretches of the day, but other elements mattered even more.

Each house included bathrooms with sinks, toilets, and tubs, kitchens with running water, electricity for appliances, refrigerators, and basement furnaces with ductwork leading to most rooms. These were new amenities for many residents, especially those who had come from the company towns owned by area coal companies. In those “coal patches,” 93 percent had no furnace and 84 percent had no bathrooms.¹² Because many residents did not have these before, and because their inclusion drove up the cost of building the homes, some in the Roosevelt administration lobbied to leave them out of subsistence homesteads. By some accounts, these included Harold Ickes and Franklin Roosevelt himself. But Eleanor Roosevelt considered these to be essential to dignified living and insisted they be included.¹³

Indoor plumbing allowed for standards of hygiene not possible with backyard outhouses and cold water from outdoor pumps. Residents could wash their food, their clothes, their homes, and themselves with greater ease and effectiveness. In cold months, when families ran their furnaces regularly, they had ready access to hot water throughout the day and night.¹⁴

Electricity allowed families to extend their days at either end, a luxury that eluded most rural families until the New Deal. Before electricity, families in rural Pennsylvania relied primarily on kerosene lamps for light. These lamps were prone to fire and offered little illumination. They forced users to complete most activities that required light, including dinner preparation and cleanup, in sunlight hours—no easy practice in western Pennsylvania. The region saw only fifty-nine cloudless days in an average year, and the sun set by five o'clock in the dead of winter.¹⁵

Though the houses might have been the most visible and lasting manifestation of the Subsistence Homestead community, its most distinguishing characteristic, at least initially, was likely the garden that each family was required to plant and maintain. Each plot of land consisted of between two and five acres, and homestead rules required families to establish and tend at

least a one-acre garden on their property. In addition, families had chicken coops with fifty chickens to provide the family with eggs.

Just as important to homestead planners and managers as the houses and gardens was the cultivation of a strong cooperative culture that drew community members to each other and beyond. Early community managers used a family's willingness to embrace a cooperative culture and commitment to the community as a determinative quality for deciding which of the 2,000 applicants they accepted into the program. The community sponsored regular educational programs and meetings to promote the cooperative ethos and the development of a rich array of local organizations for this purpose. Community groups such as the Mothers' Club, theater production committee, study clubs, and the *Homestead Informer*, the community's newsletter; cultivated strong bonds.¹⁶ A shared belief in white racial supremacy also drew many of the residents of Norvelt together, as it did most members of the Subsistence Homestead program nationally.¹⁷

RACE AND SUBSISTENCE HOMESTEADS

The Subsistence Homestead program's failure to overcome racial segregation is no surprise given the federal governments experiences with public housing. David Freund shares that

we know that New Deal-era and postwar housing programs—most famously the programs of the Public Housing Administration (PHA), the Urban Renewal Administration (URA), and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA)—accepted and codified white racial prejudices, in turn facilitating urban and suburban development patterns that systematically segregated populations by race while denying most racial minorities access to home ownership and better quality accommodations.¹⁸

Richard Rothstein argues that the federal government segregated the public housing it constructed to accommodate those involved in work projects, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Civilian Conservation Corps, where workers could find no nearby housing. But even in places where the federal government aimed at providing housing as the end itself, such as in many Public Works Administration projects, it perpetuated and even

introduced segregation where it did not exist. Richard Rothstein in *The Color of Law* states that Harold Ickes, PWA director and a past president of the Chicago branch of the NAACP,

established a “neighborhood composition rule”: federal housing projects should reflect the previous racial composition of their neighborhoods. Projects in white areas could house only white tenants, those in African American areas could house only African American tenants, and only those in already-integrated neighborhoods could house both whites and blacks.¹⁹

In the few integrated neighborhoods to host federal housing projects, “the PWA segregated projects.”²⁰

There were few integrated neighborhoods in the early twentieth-century United States. Some neighborhoods appeared integrated as they transitioned from white to black, but residential segregation, rooted in white beliefs about their own biological superiority, pervaded US cities, north and south.²¹ The New Deal affirmed rather than challenged these prejudices.²²

The Subsistence Homestead program was no different. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH) planned no racially integrated projects and dragged its feet on constructing homesteads for African Americans.²³ It built only two of the original thirty-four homesteads for African Americans. The Resettlement Administration constructed more communities for African Americans, such as Aberdeen Gardens in Hampton, Virginia, and Cahaba Homestead Village in Trussville, Alabama, but they were inferior to the white homestead projects. The houses in African American projects were smaller than those in white homesteads and lacked amenities common to white houses, such as indoor plumbing.²⁴

A review of correspondence between African Americans seeking to participate in DSH projects reveals a consistent commitment to segregation and discrimination. Subsistence Homestead officials were reluctant to reveal to African American applicants that their race precluded them from joining a homestead community and favored mild subterfuge instead. Thus, Charles Pynchon, general manager of the Federal Subsistence Homesteads Corporation, told a representative of an African American community in Wilmer, Arkansas, who wanted to establish a homestead community that the DSH had limited funds and could take no more applications for projects in November 1934. Pynchon then canceled a project already planned for African

Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama, by relying on a ruling not enforced for projects with white residents. He claimed that the US solicitor general had just ruled that all “homesteaders be selected from cities” because the original legislation sought to “aid in the redistribution of the over-balance of population in urban areas.”²⁵ While this was certainly a concern that the original legislation sought to address, many homestead communities were located in rural areas and filled with residents from those areas.

Moreover, when urban African Americans proposed homestead projects, they were most often deflected. For example, the Reverend J. D. Simmons of Duquesne, Pennsylvania, a steel-mill town near Pittsburgh, applied for a small project to include African Americans from Duquesne and nearby McKeesport. When he heard nothing back about his application, he approached his congressman, Matthew A. Dunn, who inquired about the project directly. Bruce L. Melvin responded to Congressman Dunn that his inquiry had been referred to Melvin because Melvin had “general charge of the colored problems all over the country.” Melvin declined to support the project because “it does not seem feasible for the proposed homesteaders to amortize their loans.”²⁶ These were poor families after all. But so were all homestead residents in every project, most of whom were unemployed. Melvin had in effect discriminated against a proposal for an African American homestead because he believed that racial discrimination would preclude the residents from ever earning enough income to pay for their homes.

Norvelt’s story follows the broad outlines of the larger Subsistence Homesteads narrative, with one small but perhaps meaningful departure, the White family. Helen and Chauncey White, a black couple with young children, applied for admission to Norvelt despite the misgivings of their family and members of their church. Sarah Brown, one of the White children, remembers, “No one else [meaning other Black families] wanted to move there.” Chauncey White’s brother “predicted they would be run out of Norvelt” because of racism.²⁷

Nonetheless, the Whites, like all those who sought to live in the New Deal community, wanted to have a home, land, and the hope of a better future, and saw admission to Norvelt as the way to achieve them. Although the Whites “compared favorably with the . . . [white] selected families,” a majority of the Homesteaders’ Cooperative Association rejected them because they were black. Undeterred, Helen White wrote directly to President Roosevelt asking for his help.²⁸ According to Norma Williams, one of the White children, Roosevelt “wrote back that there would be no

discrimination in Norvelt.”²⁹ Norvelt’s manager, David Day, agreed and wrote a letter stating, “if a homesteader has prejudices that are not in line with the . . . project the only action open to him is withdrawal from the project.”³⁰ The association relented and allowed the Whites to move to Norvelt. It took the combined efforts of the Whites, President Roosevelt, DSH officials, and the local manager, a Quaker who communicated the DSH decision and threat to the homesteaders, to convince the settlers they had to admit the Whites. The Whites moved in and lived happily in Norvelt for decades, according to two of the children. Norvelt and the Whites proved to be the exception, not the rule. The administration allowed a whites-only policy in other subsistence homesteads and the Whites were the only African American family in Norvelt.

THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF NORVELT

The failure to create a Subsistence Homestead community with meaningful racial integration constituted a lost opportunity for the residents and the broader Subsistence Homestead program. The establishment of Norvelt as a racially mixed community could have encouraged the founding generation and their descendants to see beyond these differences to their shared humanity. But creating an essentially white town kept the existing racial divide alive and made transcending those divisions even more difficult for subsequent generations. One can see this in Norvelt’s political transformation in recent decades, as its residents held onto their commitment to racial privilege at the expense of their political affiliation.

The first generation of Norvelters were solid Democrats. In 1940, close to 90 percent of Norvelt voters cast their ballot for Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Although the percentage of Norvelt residents who voted for Democratic presidential candidates declined gradually during the 1940s and 1950s to close to 60 percent, it rose precipitously to over 80 percent in the 1964 presidential election. Since the 1990s support for Republican presidential, state, and local candidates has gradually increased. In 2008 a majority of Norvelt voters opted for a Republican presidential candidate, John McCain, not the Democratic one, Barack Obama, for the first time. The trend away from the Democratic Party and for the Republican Party has steadily and relentlessly grown. Voting results in Westmoreland County, where Norvelt is located, have mirrored those of Norvelt (fig. 3).

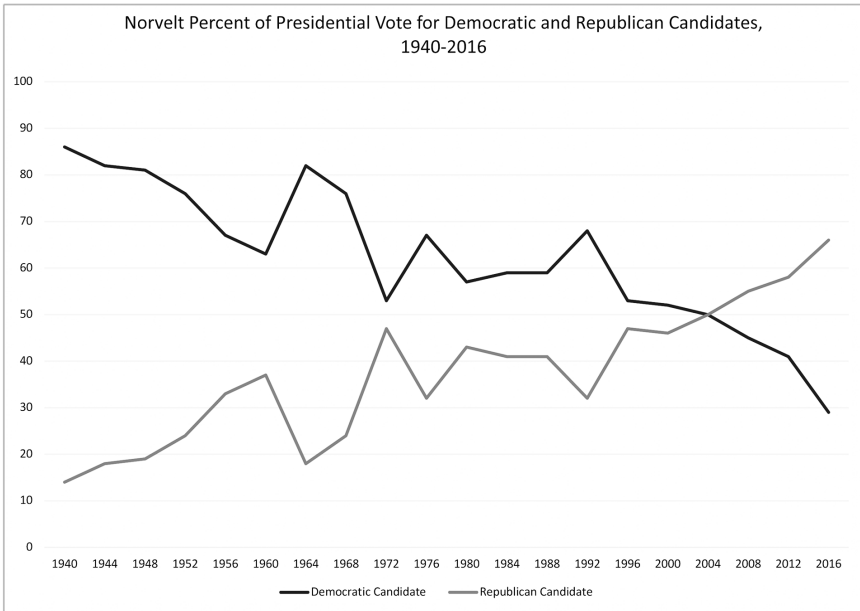


FIGURE 3 Percentage of Presidential Vote for Democratic and Republican Candidates in Norvelt, 1940–2016. From General Elections records, Westmoreland County, Westmoreland County Courthouse, Records Management.

Westmoreland County changed in several significant ways during the latter part of the twentieth century, and some of these transformations likely impacted voting patterns. Industry declined and, as a result, so did unions, which had been closely allied with the Democratic Party. The 1980s was a very difficult decade for unionized workers in Westmoreland County as plant after plant moved overseas. During the 1980s the massive steel mills in Pittsburgh and the Monongahela River Valley shut down.³¹ The 1986 closure of the Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel plant in Monessen meant several hundred unionized workers lost their jobs.³² During that same decade glass production factories in Jeannette, a small town known as “The Glass City,” closed, leading to the loss of more jobs (from the 1880s through the early 1900s, Jeannette manufactured 70% of the world’s glass).³³ One of the more significant blows came in 1988, when the Volkswagen factory in New Stanton, just eight miles from Norvelt, closed and some 2,500 United Automobile Workers lost their jobs.³⁴

The closure of factories in the 1980s had a cascading effect on Westmoreland County. The diminishing number of industrial jobs and the concomitant loss

of union labor furthered the shift away from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. Voters in Norvelt and Westmoreland County elected more and more Republicans and fewer and fewer Democrats.

According to a former state senator and representative, Alan Kukovich, the deindustrialization of Westmoreland County also led to an aging population, as younger people moved out to find better jobs. In 2000 the median age in Westmoreland County was 41.3; by 2017 it was 47.2 years old, which was 20 percent higher than the median age for the entire state of Pennsylvania and 25 percent higher than the United States.³⁵ These economic shifts have also impacted people's affective communities. Before the 1980s most workers belonged to unions and many attended meetings with fellow members. Union membership extended beyond industrial workers to include tradespeople. Even musicians had their own union. Every month the Westmoreland County Labor Council (WCLC) held monthly meetings, which were well attended because "all the unions would send members."³⁶ Today few people participate in the monthly gatherings. According to Walter Geiger, WCLC president, "we got down to five members at the meeting."³⁷

Another significant factor affecting people's political leanings was the passing of the older generation, those who moved from extreme poverty in the coal-mining "patch" communities to the comforts of Norvelt. In 1934 the average age of the male homesteader was 36.8, which meant that those who were still alive in the 1980s were in their upper eighties.³⁸ By 2008, when the authors began their research on Norvelt, none were left alive, although some of their children were.

When the original settlers died, they took with them their direct memories of the privations, cold, hunger, fear, and desperation that had dogged them in the patch communities. Gone with them as well was the profound sense of gratitude and loyalty they felt toward the Roosevelts, the New Deal programs, and the Democratic Party that, in their mind, had saved them. Some of their children, many of whom remained in Norvelt, had also experienced the harsh conditions of the patch communities and remembered well how much their lives had improved thanks especially, as they told us, to Eleanor Roosevelt. Others who were born in and grew up in Norvelt heard the stories but did not directly experience the suffering their parents or grandparents did.

The passing of the first generation combined with their descendants' increased economic security and sense of well-being also contributed to Norvelters' political preferences veering right politically. As various Norvelt

residents whom the authors spoke with said, their economic status was far, far higher than that of their parents and grandparents. They considered themselves firmly entrenched in the middle class and exuded an air of financial security. Indeed, in 2009, one year into the Great Recession, Norvelt residents fared better than many. Only 7.5 percent of Norvelters lived in poverty, compared to 12.5 percent in Pennsylvania, and 14.4 percent in the United States.³⁹ The poverty rate has since declined. In 2016 it stood at 0.8 percent and the median household income grew to \$57,035, which was higher than that of Westmoreland County, Pittsburgh, or the United States. The value of houses has kept pace with the growth in income. The median property value of a house in 2016 was \$144,000.⁴⁰

Indeed, the success Norvelt enjoyed contributed to the inhabitants' positive image of themselves, just as it shaped their perception of others, those who have not experienced the same upward mobility as did Norvelt residents over the past three generations. In *Suburban Warriors* Lisa McGirr points out, "The largely white-collared, educated, and often highly skilled women and men who embraced right-wing politics saw their own lives and the flowering communities where they made their homes as tributes to the possibilities of individual entrepreneurial success."⁴¹ Norvelters, in turn, perceived their advance up the economic and class ladder as a tribute to and the result of their, their parents', and their grandparents' work ethic and commitment to family and community. Yes, many of them told the authors, they needed government aid, but that alone did not and could not account for their progress. They made it because they were the "deserving poor." Those who failed to make it had only themselves to blame. They refused to work, they were lazy, they expected and depended on government handouts, which, as their very lack of success proves, they did not and do not deserve.

Thus, the passage of time and the attainment of a middle-class lifestyle, with all the material goods and benefits associated with it, dimmed the memories or stories of life in the patch communities. Gratitude to the Roosevelts remains embedded in the Norvelt psyche, but the changed economic and political conditions in which the current inhabitants live have undercut the power of these sentiments.

One other significant explanation for the political and ideological shift is Richard Mellon Scaife's largely successful effort to promulgate his right-wing beliefs. Mellon Scaife was the ultraconservative and extremely wealthy great grandson of Thomas Mellon, the founder of Mellon Bank.⁴² In 1969 he purchased the local daily newspaper, the *Greensburg Tribune-Review* and

used it to advance his conservative ideology.⁴³ Two to three hundred households in Norvelt and 55,000 families throughout the county subscribed to the daily paper, as did a whopping 95,000 on Sunday in 2012.⁴⁴ This makes the *Tribune-Review* the most widely read newspaper in both Norvelt and Westmoreland County. To ensure a wide and continuing readership, the *Tribune-Review* was distributed free in the schools, which meant that students “studied the news from the *Trib* in their classes.”⁴⁵ Because so many people bought and presumably read the newspaper, it is reasonable to conclude its political perspectives influenced readers’ political attitudes.

One can indeed hear clear echoes of opinions stated in the *Tribune-Review* in comments made by local residents and politicians, and probably vice versa. For example, one 2013 editorial railed against welfare in general and in particular the 1996 Clinton reform. “There’s no incentive for government’s dependents to work when today’s patchwork of state and federal welfare programs provides more money—sometimes, considerably more—than entry-level jobs, according to a new report by the Cato Institute.” The editorial continues, “despite so-called welfare ‘reform’ in 1996, the slide toward dependency has grown worse in recent years.”⁴⁶ A 2017 editorial criticized President Obama’s policy on immigration and offered suggestions as to what President Trump should do:

In effect, immigration policy under Obama opened the door to illegal interlopers, who during his terms had reason to believe that they wouldn’t be deported so long as they made it to the nation’s interior and stayed out of serious trouble. To fix this, Mr. Trump first must reduce the flow of illegals. That begins by sending a clarion message that U.S. deportations of incoming illegals will now be enforced.⁴⁷

A final and perhaps dispositive element to explain Norvelters’ embrace of Republican Party politics was the Democratic Party’s role in moving the federal government toward policies that increased racial integration in the 1960s, mandated an end to racial segregation, and expanded and extended federal welfare policies to the poor, many of whom were African American. Thomas and Mary Edsall examined party affiliation and voting patterns nationally and found that the 1964 Civil Rights Act began to alienate many white Democrats from the party that most favored racial equality. Republicans capitalized on this growing alienation and successfully linked white racial resentment to issues of taxation. The Edsalls concluded that “taxes . . . have been used to drive home the cost to whites of federal programs that redistribute

benefits to blacks and other minorities. . . . Race and taxes, on their own, have changed the votes of millions of once-Democratic men and women.”⁴⁸

Although Norvelt is the product of government welfare, many Norvelt residents decisively distinguish their parents and grandparents from more recent recipients of welfare. They conclude the Roosevelt administration made the right choice in selecting their parents and grandparents to be among the original settlers of Norvelt. They also simultaneously believe that the federal government erred in considering African Americans as deserving recipients of federal programs, as Great Society legislation did. Mike Reese, the first Republican to represent Norvelt since the New Deal, came into office in 2008. He echoed this sentiment when he contrasted Roosevelt’s government assistance programs to those of Barack Obama:

To me it looks like the President [Obama] believes in the redistribution of wealth. . . . FDR said okay, look this is what the government is going to do, but this is what you have to do to benefit from this. You know, there was an agreement, a deal if you would, that the government is going to be there for you, we’re going to do this, but you have to work to get it. It’s not going to be free. It’s not going to be a handout. There is going to be a commitment on both of our parts. I think that the current administration pushes that the government is going to take care of you. And that’s it; which of course, when you get into these entitlement programs, it becomes a concern.⁴⁹

Lois Weyandt’s parents were among the first homesteaders to take up residence in Norvelt. Her assessment of the town simultaneously lauds the homesteaders and criticizes those who did not achieve the degree of economic and social stability the New Deal community did.

Norvelt, you could go there today and the place is neat and tidy, and people take pride in their homes and they realize how they got them. So many people say they were given to us. They weren’t given to us; we were given the opportunity to provide and work to keep that house and to pay for it in the work we did.⁵⁰

In Weyandt’s mind, Norvelt’s success represents the public manifestation of its residents’ worthiness, just as poverty and reliance on government aid testify to people’s failures.

Weyandt's explanation of the winners and losers parallels current Republican Party discourse in Westmoreland County and beyond. Two women officers of the Republican Party in District 7 of Westmoreland County, where Norvelt is located, shared their thoughts on Trump's appeal to the white working-class voters of the district. Karen Kiefer is District 7 treasurer, an attorney, and a life-long Republican. In September 2017 she participated in the Scottsdale Fall Festival, registering voters, many of whom had been members of the Democratic Party since the 1940s but were switching to the Republican Party because "the party left them."⁵¹ Or, as she wrote on the District 7 webpage, "They [the newly registered Republicans] said they joined the Republican party because it now represented the working man, whereas the Democrats represented those on welfare, the looters."⁵²

Catherine Fike is secretary of District 7. Her parents emigrated from Poland and her father worked in the coal mines of southwest Pennsylvania. When he struck for higher wages and better conditions, the Coal and Iron Police beat him, as they did many other miners.⁵³ The family was solid Democrats and members or supporters of the United Mine Workers. Fike's parents made sure she and her eight siblings were educated and advanced up the economic and social ladder. The fact that three of the children have PhDs affirms the family's merit, just as the homes and achievements of those in Norvelt establish their inhabitants' value.

Fike bucked the family tradition by voting for President Reagan in 1980; she has voted for Republican candidates ever since. Her thoughts about race and class influence her political affiliation. When asked why she thought black people did not vote for Trump, she replied, "They knew he would cut the entitlement programs and they would have to work."⁵⁴

Earl Saville moved to Norvelt with his parents in the 1930s and lived in the same house his entire life until his death in 2016. When he reflected on why John McCain polled more voters than Barack Obama, he came up with the answer relatively quickly. In his mind, "there's a reason for that . . . a black president. I don't care if it's in Norvelt, if it's down in Poughkeepsie, New York, wherever. It's because discrimination is still here."⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Norvelt offers a community-level view into some of the successes and failures of the New Deal. It is a key site from which to evaluate the legacy of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt writ small, and large. Norvelt illustrates

the ability that the federal government had and has to positively transform people's lives. At a time of profound economic crisis, the Roosevelt administration developed national programs that not only saved people's lives, but radically improved them. Norvelt is one shining example of such a program. Unemployed and impoverished miners and their families gained not only new homes and resources, but also entry to a range of social, educational, and economic opportunities that had been denied them. Because of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, the direct intervention of Eleanor Roosevelt, the work of the Quaker American Friends Service Committee, and the willingness, indeed eagerness, of the grandparents and great-grandparents of the current inhabitants of Norvelt, destitute miners and their families moved from lives of desperation and deprivation to those of upwardly mobile middle-class members of a still-thriving community.

This success, unfortunately, was marred by what we consider one of the New Deal and the Roosevelt administration's most significant failures: the decision not to challenge white supremacy and, instead, to design policies that predominantly favored white people. One cannot know what would have happened had the Roosevelt administration chosen to make racial integration integral to the New Deal programs. However, Norvelt shows that the creation and support of overwhelmingly white communities not only failed to challenge existing ideas of the correct racial order but reinforced this pernicious social belief and allowed it to extend for decades after the Roosevelts had departed from the scene. Norvelt descendants understood their success, their acquired membership in the middle class, as tangible proof of their ancestors' inherent virtue, of their deservedness. They associated that virtue with their whiteness. That others who received government support did not achieve the same status as Norvelt residents affirmed their unworthiness. These "looters," to use county leader Karen Kiefer's term, took advantage of worthy white citizens.

Subsistence Homesteads did not create racial prejudice and discrimination, but they allowed these beliefs and practices to live unchallenged among a population that flourished in partnership with the federal government. In so doing, the Subsistence Homestead program affirmed, however implicitly, the normality of racial hierarchy.

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and the Struggle for Community During the Great Depression, coauthored with Margaret Power and Michael Cary (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), and *The Transformation of American Catholicism: The Pittsburgh Laity and the Second Vatican Council* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

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NOTES

1. Official Election Results for Westmoreland County, General Elections, November 2, 2016, pa-Westmorelandcounty2.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/10281 (accessed October 11, 2017).
2. Norvelt was originally called Westmoreland Homesteads. The federal government established a post office there in 1937, and residents voted to call that post office Norvelt. The community came to be known as Norvelt. To avoid confusion, the authors call it Norvelt.
3. A number of studies of individual communities have been published in recent years to update the classic history of the program; see Paul Conkin's *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press for the American Historical Association, 1959). See especially Robert M. Carriker, *Urban Farming in the West: A New Deal Experiment in Subsistence Homesteads* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010), and Timothy Kelly, Margaret Power, and Michael Cary, *Hope in Hard Times: Norvelt and the Struggle for Community during the Great Depression* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).
4. Though the houses all had basement furnaces with ductwork leading to most rooms, some of the second-floor rooms derived too little heat from the ducts to provide sufficient warmth on very cold days. One informant shared with the authors that one shared duct left the bathroom far too cold in the dead of winter. Earl Saville, interview with Margaret Power, December 27, 2009, Norvelt, Pennsylvania.
5. Mrs. Helen White wrote to Roosevelt and convinced him to intervene on the family's behalf, which his administration did. Sarah Brown, phone interview with Margaret Power, Denver, CO, January 1, 2012.

6. A number of recent histories have traced the role that racism played in election campaigns, voting outcomes, and public policy debates in the latter part of the twentieth century. For example, see Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017); Elaine Tyler May, *Fortress America: How We Embraced Fear and Abandoned Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), esp. chap. 2, “The Color of Danger, From Red to Black”; Peter B. Levy, *The Great Uprising: Race Riots in Urban America during the 1960s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. chap. 6, “One Nation, Two Responses,” and chap. 8, “Fighting Back”; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 120–22; David Daley, *RatF**ked: Why Your Vote Doesn't Count* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017); Sanford F. Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording, eds., *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
7. Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2013), 15. Neither “race” nor “segregation” appears in the index to Michael Hiltzik’s otherwise insightful recent history entitled *The New Deal: A Modern History* (New York: Free Press, 2011). Other histories do address this concern directly, such as Roger Biles’s *A New Deal for the American People* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991), and Anthony J. Badger’s *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989), and Harvard Sitkoff’s *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). But David Kennedy’s Pulitzer Prize–winning volume in the Oxford History of the United States skips this dimension of the New Deal until he discusses racism’s impact on African American military service in 1944, nearly 400 pages after his chapter summing up the New Deal’s impact, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 775.
8. For the bargain with southern Democrats, in addition to Katznelson’s work, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), 50–55, and G. William Domhoff and Michael J. Webber, *Class and Power in the New Deal: Corporate Moderates, Southern Democrats, and the Liberal-Labor Coalition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Similarly, Jill Lepore notes that political considerations kept Roosevelt from supporting programs that protected African Americans in *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: Norton, 2018), 458.
9. See especially Barton J. Bernstein, “The New Deal: The Conservative Achievement of Liberal Reform,” in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Random House, 1967), 263–88.

10. For example, national, regional, and local newspapers, speaking on behalf of industrial and financial interests, lambasted the subsistence housing program as a “palpable failure” or labeled the settlements as “a utopian fantasy of Mrs. Roosevelt.” See Kelly, Power, and Cary, *Hope in Hard Times*, 115–16.
11. For a fuller development of the New Deal efforts to substitute cooperation for competition, see Alan Lawson, *A Commonwealth of Hope: The New Deal Response to Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 115.
12. Paul McCormick Campbell, “Westmoreland Homesteads: A Planned Community for Destitute Bituminous Coal Miners and Low Income Industrial Workers” (master’s thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1940), 39–41.
13. Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, vol. 2, 1933–1938 (New York: Viking, 1992), 135. Harold Ickes recorded in his diary that Franklin Roosevelt agreed that the spending on such things as bathrooms was extravagant, but he deferred to Eleanor on the issue. See also Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 366.
14. In warmer months, many houses had auxiliary water heaters that they could fire up to provide water for baths.
15. In recognition of the significance that the electric light meant to families, community architect Paul Bartholomew designed the ceiling mounted light fixtures himself. For a rich discussion of the changes that electricity brought to domestic life, see David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 287–89, 303.
16. For a description of the various clubs that existed in Norvelt see Kelly, Power, and Cary, *Hope in Hard Times*, 88–95.
17. Religious differences between Protestants and Catholics existed in Norvelt, however, they did not constitute the sharp divide that race did. Catholics and Protestants were discouraged from dating or marrying each other, for example, but practicing either of these religions did not constitute a factor in granting or denying a family admission to Norvelt. Carol Davis, interview with authors, Norvelt, PA, November 11, 2011.
18. David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 5, 6.
19. Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017), 21.
20. *Ibid.*, 23.
21. Historians have explored this phenomenon in urban settings robustly. See, for example, Thomas Lee Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto: Neighborhood Deterioration and Middle-Class Reform, Chicago, 1880–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Kevin Fox Gotham, *Race, Real*

- Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900–2010*, 2nd ed. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014); Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Residential racial discrimination persisted well beyond World War II. For discussions of the postwar phenomena, see Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
22. For discussions of the federal government's role in promoting racial segregation in housing, see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the American Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), esp. chap. 12, "Public Housing for the Worthy Poor"; Antero Pietila, *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), esp. chap. 5, "Mapping Bigotry"; Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. chaps. 11 and 12.
23. Kristin M. Szylyan, *The Mutual Housing Experiment: New Deal Communities for the Urban Middle Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 17–18.
24. The Roosevelt administration originally set up the Subsistence Homestead Division as an independent entity; it planned and built thirty-four homestead communities. Roosevelt later consolidated all community building enterprises under the Resettlement Administration, which oversaw roughly 100 projects all together. For an engaging comparison of projects designated for whites and blacks in Alabama, see Susan Elizabeth (Beth) Hunter, "Subsistence Homesteads in Jefferson County: A Successful "Experiment?" (master's thesis, University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2012).
25. James Dodd, W. J. Ashford, and Ealland Lamb to Charles E. Pynchon, October 30, 1934; Charles E. Pynchon to James Dodd, November 12, 1934, Charles E. Pynchon to Thorn Dickinson, December 13, 1934, "General Correspondence with Replies to Specific Individuals, 1933–1935," Record Group 96, National Archives and Records Administration.
26. Bruce L. Melvin to Honorable Matthew A. Dunn, April 11, 1934, "General Correspondence with Replies to Specific Individuals, 1933–1935," Record Group 96, National Archives and Records Administration.
27. Sarah Brown, née White, phone interview with Margaret Power, Denver, CO, January 1, 2012 (hereafter Brown interview).
28. Ibid.; Campbell, "Westmoreland Homesteads," 49.
29. "Norvelt's First Black Settler Leaves Behind Quite a Legacy," *Greensburg Tribune Review*, November 15, 1988, A1.
30. David Day, "To All Homesteaders," letter to Westmoreland Homestead selected homesteaders, March 20, 1935. Personal copy of Carol Davis.
31. For background on the socioeconomic changes in the region see John P. Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline of the American Steel*

- Industry* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988); Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky (photographer), *A Town Without Steel: Envisioning Homestead* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998); William Serrin, *Homestead: The Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town* (New York: Times Books, 1992); Allen Dieterich-Ward, *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
32. Cassandra Vivian, *Monessen. A Steel Country Town* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 144; "Wheeling to Close Rail Mill," *New York Times*, December 25, 1986, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1986/12/25/107286.html?action=click&contentCollection=Archives&module=LedeAsset®ion=ArchiveBody&pgtype=article&pageNumber=46> (accessed February 1, 2019).
 33. Richard O'Connor, introduction to *Town of Jeannette. HABS No. PA-6087*, Historic American Buildings Survey (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, 2001), 2, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/master/pnp/habshaer/pa/pa3000/pa3086/data/pa3086data.pdf> (accessed February 1, 2019); Diana Digangi, "Pennsylvania's 'Glass City' Finds Footing in Battle against Rust Belt Hardships," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 27, 2018 (accessed February 1, 2019).
 34. O'Connor, *Town of Jeannette*; John Holusha, "Volkswagen to Shut U.S. Plant," *New York Times*, November 21, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/21/business/volkswagen-to-shut-us-plant.html?auth=login-smartlock> (accessed February 1, 2019).
 35. "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000," US Census Bureau, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF> (accessed February 7, 2019); "Westmoreland County, PA," Census Counter, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US42129-westmoreland-county-pa/> (accessed February 6, 2019).
 36. Alan Kukovich, phone interview with Margaret Power, Manor, PA, February 2, 2018 (hereafter Kukovich interview). Kukovich was the representative from the 56th District to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives from 1977 to 1996 and state senator from 1996 to 2004 from the 39th District. His areas included Norvelt and parts of Westmoreland County.
 37. Walter Geiger, interview with Margaret Power, Greensburg, PA, by phone, May 8, 2018. But, he added, "we are now up to twenty." At the same time union membership plummeted, Kukovich pointed out, "evangelical mega churches have really grown. They are really large and spread out geographically in the middle part of the county" (Kukovich interview). More research is required to determine if there is a direct correlation between the decline in union membership and the rise of the mega churches, but the two coincided with each other in time. For example, Word of Life, one of the larger Evangelical churches, started in 1986 in Greensburg. "Word of Life Church," <http://wordoflife.church/about/staff> (accessed February 5, 2019).

38. "Construction of Homes Starts Soon in State," *Olean (NY) Times Herald*, June 14, 1934. There is no similar data on the age of the women; however, it is safe to assume it paralleled that of men, give or take a few years.
39. "New Numbers of Just How Many Americans Are Living in Poverty," *The World Newser*, October 20, 2009; "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010," US Census Bureau, September 13, 2011, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/income_wealth/cb11-157.html (accessed February 4, 2019).
40. "Data USA: Norvelt, PA," <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/norvelt-pa/> (accessed February 4, 2019).
41. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors. The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.
42. For a revealing look into Mellon Scaife's history, including his personal depravities and financial largesse to right-wing causes, see Jane Mayer, "The Hidden Hand: Richard Mellon Scaife," chap. 2 in Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017).
43. "Richard Mellon Scaife, Obituary," *Greensburg Tribune Review*, July 5, 2014, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/triblive-tribune-review/obituary.aspx?n=richard-mellon-scaife&pid=171644236> (accessed February 4, 2019).
44. Jeff Simmons, phone interview with Margaret Power, Greensburg, PA, June 14, 2012. Norvelt households had grown beyond the original 250 because residents subdivided their land and built additional houses on the new plots.
45. Tom Balya, phone interview with Margaret Power, Greensburg, PA, February 9, 2018. Balya was Westmoreland County Commissioner from 1996 to 2011.
46. "Welfare vs. Work: Government's Perversion," *TribLive*, August 22, 2013, <https://triblive.com/opinion/editorials/4569570-74/welfare-government-cato> (accessed February 4, 2019).
47. "Drop in Deportations: A New Message Is Needed," *TribLive*, January 22, 2017, <https://triblive.com/opinion/editorials/11778759-74/deportations-illegals-immigration> (accessed February 4, 2019).
48. Thomas Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Riots, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 4.
49. Mike Reese, interview with Margaret Power, Norvelt, PA., November 9, 2011.
50. Lois Weyandt, phone interview with Margaret Power, Greensburg, PA, July 28, 2012.
51. Karen Kiefer, phone interview with Margaret Power, Scottsdale, PA, October 9, 2017. Scottsdale is eleven miles from Norvelt. It was the headquarters of the H. C. Frick Coke Company in the early twentieth century.
52. WCRC [Westmoreland County Republican Committee] District 7 Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/WCRCDistrict7/> (accessed October 8, 2017).
53. The coal operators employed the Coal and Iron Police to patrol and repress the mining communities. When miners struck, the police assaulted the strikers and

evicted the families from the company-owned patches. See J. P. Shalloo, *Private Police, with Special Reference to Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1933).

54. Catherine Fike, phone interview with Margaret Power, Scottsdale, PA, October 9, 2017.
55. Earl Saville, interview with Margaret Power, Norvelt, PA, December 27, 2009.