

# **Teaching American History Project**

**Eleanor Roosevelt**

*Changing the Role of the First Lady*

By: Ryan Broderick

**Grade:** 9-12

**Length of Period:** 1-2 84 Minute Blocks

**Inquiry:** In this lesson students draw on their previous studies of American history and culture as they analyze letters written to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Students will work in groups reading and analyzing letters written by children to Eleanor Roosevelt. The goal of the lesson is to have the students understand the circumstances that children faced in the Great Depression, as well as assess the influence of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The essential question asks, “How can unelected government officials affect society?”

## **Objectives:**

Students will know and be able to:

- To understand the role of the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt during the Great Depression.
- Analyze some of the letters written to the First Lady during the Great Depression.

## **Materials:**

- Article
- Select Letters written to Eleanor Roosevelt (others can be accessed at <http://newdeal.feri.org/ELEANOR/er3a.htm>)
- Analysis of Roosevelt Letters handout

## **Activities:**

- Introduction: Read an article about the public service of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Discuss the role of previous First Ladies.
- Group students into groups of 3-4 mixed ability pairs. Hand out select letters written to Mrs. Roosevelt during the Great Depression.
- Students take turn reading the letters aloud. Notes should be taken on the purpose and content of each letter.
- In group, analyze the letters through the student handout included.
- Students complete #6 of the student handout. Letters will be submitted to school administration after the period.
- Closure: Come together as a class and discuss the findings of the groups. Also, discuss the role of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. What should be the role of the First Lady (or First Lad!)? How much responsibility should an un-elected official have? Discuss how Eleanor Roosevelt treated the office of the First Lady. Was she political? What real power did she hold? Did she serve to further her husband’s political career, or did she focus on her own interests? Discuss the

letters you chose to write to one of the administrators. Discuss the topics as a class. Follow-up when answers come back from the administrators.

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**Assessment:**

Informal:

- Check and Monitor Progress
- Class Discussion

Formal:

- Analysis of letters to Eleanor Roosevelt (Worksheet)
- Letter to school administrator

**CT State Standards:**

Educational experiences in **Grades 9-12** will assure that students:

- Formulate historical questions and hypotheses from multiple perspectives using multiple sources
- Identify various parties and analyze their interest in conflicts from selected historical periods
- Display empathy for people who have lived in the past

# Eleanor Roosevelt

- **America's most influential First Lady blazed paths for women and led the battle for social justice everywhere**

By DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN


Monday, April 13, 1998

When Eleanor Roosevelt journeyed to New York City a week after her husband's funeral in April 1945, a cluster of reporters were waiting at the door of her Washington Square apartment. "The story is over," she said simply, assuming that her words and opinions would no longer be of interest once her husband was dead and she was no longer First Lady. She could not have been more mistaken. As the years have passed, Eleanor Roosevelt's influence and stature have continued to grow. Today she remains a powerful inspiration to leaders in both the civil rights and women's movements.

Eleanor shattered the ceremonial mold in which the role of the First Lady had traditionally been fashioned, and reshaped it around her own skills and her deep commitment to social reform. She gave a voice to people who did not have access to power. She was the first woman to speak in front of a national convention, to write a syndicated column, to earn money as a lecturer, to be a radio commentator and to hold regular press conferences.

The path to this unique position of power had not been easy. The only daughter of an alcoholic father and a beautiful but aloof mother who was openly disappointed by Eleanor's lack of a pretty face, Eleanor was plagued by insecurity and shyness. An early marriage to her handsome fifth cousin once removed, Franklin Roosevelt, increased her insecurity and took away her one source of confidence: her work in a New York City settlement house. "For 10 years, I was always just getting over having a baby or about to have another one," she later lamented, "so my occupations were considerably restricted."

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Categories 

But 13 years after her marriage, and after bearing six children, Eleanor resumed the search for her identity. The voyage began with a shock: the discovery in 1918 of love letters revealing that Franklin was involved with Lucy Mercer. "The bottom dropped out of my own particular world," she later said. "I faced myself, my surroundings, my world, honestly for the first time." There was talk of divorce, but when Franklin promised never to see Lucy again, the marriage continued. For Eleanor a new path had opened, a possibility of standing apart from Franklin. No longer would she define herself solely in terms of his wants and needs. A new relationship was forged, on terms wholly different from the old.

She turned her energies to a variety of reformist organizations, joining a circle of postsuffrage feminists dedicated to the abolition of child labor, the establishment of a minimum wage and the passage of legislation to protect workers. In the process she discovered that she had talents--for public speaking, for organizing, for articulating social problems. She formed an extraordinary constellation of lifelong female friends, who helped to assuage an enduring sense of loneliness. When Franklin was paralyzed by polio in 1921, her political activism became an even more vital force. She became Franklin's "eyes and ears," traveling the country gathering the grass-roots knowledge he needed to understand the people he governed.

They made an exceptional team. She was more earnest, less devious, less patient, less fun, more uncompromisingly moral; he possessed the more trustworthy political talent, the more finely tuned sense of timing, the better feel for the citizenry, the smarter understanding of how to get things done. But they were linked by indissoluble bonds. Together they mobilized the American people to effect enduring changes in the political and social landscape of the nation.

Nowhere was Eleanor's influence greater than in civil rights. In her travels around the country, she developed a sophisticated understanding of race relations. When she first began inspecting New Deal programs in the South, she was stunned to find that blacks were being systematically discriminated against at every turn. Citing statistics to back up her story, she would interrupt her husband at any time, barging into his cocktail hour when he wanted only to relax, cross-examining him at dinner, handing him memos to read late at night. But her confrontational style compelled him to sign a series of Executive Orders barring discrimination in the administration of various New Deal projects. From that point on, African Americans' share in the New Deal work projects expanded, and Eleanor's independent legacy began to grow.

She understood, for instance, the importance of symbolism in fighting discrimination. In 1938, while attending the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Ala., she refused to abide by a segregation ordinance that required her to sit in the white section of the auditorium, apart from her black friends. The following year, she publicly resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution after it barred the black singer Marian Anderson from its auditorium.

During World War II, Eleanor remained an uncompromising voice on civil rights, insisting that America could not fight racism abroad while tolerating it at home. Progress was slow, but her continuing intervention led to broadened opportunities for blacks in the factories and shipyards at home and in the armed forces overseas. Eleanor's positions on civil rights were far in advance of her time: 10 years before the Supreme Court rejected the "separate but equal" doctrine, Eleanor argued that equal facilities were not enough: "The basic fact of segregation, which warps and twists the lives of our Negro population, [is] itself discriminatory."

There were other warps and twists that caught her eye. Long before the contemporary women's movement provided ideological arguments for women's rights, Eleanor instinctively challenged institutions that failed to provide equal opportunity for women. As First Lady, she held more than 300 press conferences that she cleverly restricted to women journalists, knowing that news organizations all over the country would be forced to hire their first female reporter in order to have access to the First Lady.

Through her speeches and her columns, she provided a powerful voice in the campaign to recruit women workers to the factories during the war. "If I were of debutante age, I would go into a factory, where I could learn a skill and be useful," Eleanor told young women, cautioning them against marrying too hastily before they had a chance to expand their horizons. She was instrumental in securing the first government funds ever allotted for the building of child-care centers. And when women workers were unceremoniously fired as the war came to an end, she fought to stem the tide. She argued on principle that everyone who wanted to work had a right to be productive, and she railed against the closing of the child-care centers as a shortsighted response to a fundamental social need. What the women workers needed, she said, was the courage to ask for their rights with a loud voice.

For her own part, she never let the intense criticism that she encountered silence her. "If I ... worried about mudslinging, I would have been dead long ago." Yet she insisted that she was not a feminist. She did not believe, she maintained, that "women should be judged, when it comes to appointing them or electing them, purely because they are women." She wanted to see the country "get away from considering a man or woman from the point of view of religion, color or sex." But the story of her life--her insistence on her right to an identity of her own apart from her husband and her family, her constant struggle against depression and insecurity, her ability to turn her vulnerabilities into strengths--provides an enduring example of a feminist who transcended the dictates of her times to become one of the century's most powerful and effective advocates for social justice.

*Doris Kearns Goodwin is a Pulitzer prize-winning author, historian and political analyst*

NAME:

CLASS:

DATE:

## Analysis Sheet: Letters to Eleanor Roosevelt

*Today, we are going to analyze a few of the letters written to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt during the Great Depression. You are going to work with a partner or in a group of three to complete the assignment. You are required to hand in one set of answers per group.*

Please read the letters aloud. Take turns reading the letters to the group. When you are not reading you should be taking notes. Your group must complete all of the following tasks:

1. Identify the young people who wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt by gender, age, race, religion, geographic region, education, or the apparent socio-economic status of their parents.
  - Do you see any patterns emerging throughout the letters?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - Did the letters represent a cross-section of Americans, or did a single group dominate?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - What do your findings suggest about Mrs. Roosevelt's appeal?
  
2. What are some common characteristics of those who wrote the letters?



## Letters to Eleanor Roosevelt

Granette, Ark.  
Nov. 6, 1936

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

I am writing to you for some of your old soiled dresses if you have any. As I am a poor girl who has to stay out of school. On account of dresses & slips and a coat. I am in the seventh grade but I have to stay out of school because I have no books or clothes to ware. I am in need of dresses & slips and a coat very bad. If you have any soiled clothes that you don't want to ware I would be very glad to get them. But please do not let the news paper reporters get hold of this in any way and I will keep it from geting out here so there will be no one else to get hold of it. But do not let my name get out in the paper. I am thirteen years old.

Yours Truly,  
Miss L. H.  
Gravette, Ark.  
R #3  
c/o A. H.

Port Morris N.J.  
March 20, 1934

My Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Do you realize that "Easter" is at hand? Do you realize how many hearts are broken on this account? Do you realize how hard its going to be for most people? Like me, for instance, I am a young girl of fifeteen and I need a coat, so bad I have no money, nor any means of getting any. My father has been out of work for two years.

My brother works on the C.W.A. but he is, or rather has been, insane in an asylum and has taken most of our money. My mother gets 'fits' when I ask her to buy me something new. Poor mother, I sypathize with her because it has been very hard on her, this depression, and having no money at all but debts piling up on us. I want to tell you something: We were once the richest people in our town but now, we are the lowest, considered, the worst people of Port Morris.

For Easter some friends of mine are thinking of getting new out-fits and I just have to listen to them. How I wish I could have a least a coat. That would cost about \$5.00 at least. I need a dress. I want one and it only cost \$.79 cents. Dear Eleanor how I wish I had this coat and dress for Easter I would be the happiest girl. I love you so much.

Please send me about \$6.00  
I thank you so much.

A. C.  
Port Morris  
N.J.

March 29 - 1935

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt. I am writing you a little letter this morning. Are you glad it is spring I am. For so many poor people can raise some more to eat. You no what I am writing this letter for. Mother said Mrs. Roosevelt is a God mother to the world and I though mabe you had some old clothes You no Mother is a good sewer and all the little girls are getting Easter dresses. And I though you had some you no. papa could wear Mr. Roosevelt shirts and cloth I no. My papa like Mr. Roosevelt and Mother said Mr. Roosevelt carry his worries with a smile You no he is always happy. You no we are not living on the relief we live on a little farm. papa did have a job And got laid on 5 yrs ago so we save and got two horses and 2 cows and a hog so we can all the food stuff we can ever thing to eat some time we don't have eni thing but we live. But you no it so hard to get cloth. So I though mabe you had some. You no what you though was no good Mother can make over for me I am 11 yr old. I have 2 brother and a sister 14 yr old. I wish I could see you. I no I would like you both. And shoes Mother wears 6 or 6 1/2. And papa wear 9. We have no car or no phone or Radio papa he would like to have a radio but he said there is other thing he need more. papa is worried about his seed oats. And one horse is not very good. But ever one has't to worrie, I am send this letter with the pennie I get to take to Sunday school Mother give me one So it took 3 week. Cause mother would think I better not ask for things from the the first Lady. But mother said you was an angle for doing so much for the poor. And I though that would be all rite this is some paper my teacher gave for Xmas. My add is

C.V.B.  
Rushsyhania, Ohio

Centerdale R.I  
April 17, 1938

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt

I am writing to you to ask a big favor, the biggest favor anybody can ask. I would like to know if you would pay my way to Hollywood. You may think me crazy but I not. I mean every word I say. I know you may write back and say, lots of people ask you to pay their way to Hollywood or for some other reason, but this is different honest it is you've just got to believe in me your the only one that can help. Or you may say what can I do child. Well you could tell them that you sent me and you know I can act, I'm sure they would believe you, because you tell no fibes. Just think wouldn't you be proud if I became a great movie Star and you would say to your friends, She's the little girl who wrote to me and asked if she could go to Hollywood. And I've helped to make her a great Star. I would like to tell you all this in person and then you could see me, but I have no money for carfare and I don't want you to bother to give it to me. My Little mother is a sickly lady, she is lovely so small and sweet I love my little mother dearly and I want to help her all I can so this is why I am writing to you, It will also give me a future and bring proudness to my relatives. My Little mother has something wrong with her heart which these small Doctors dont know although they do try their best. So I thought if I went to Hollywood and earned enough money I would be able to give my Little mother the best Doctors and proper care. I am not writing this letter to Mr. Roosevelt because men don't understand things like us laides do, so I am writing to you because I know you understand. I have read and heard so many nice [missing text]

I know I can act because I make little plays which I get out of story books and act them out. Please tell Mr. Roosevelt that I'm terribly sorry he lost that Bill. I think Mr. Roosevelt is doing wonders. Please be sure and tell him this, it will make him feel much better. I told some of my friends about my Idea but they only laugh at me, and I get discouraged but when I look at my Little mother I run upstairs in my room and cry. I have Mr. Roosevelt's picture in my room and his name in big read and blue letters. And when I looked at his picture it gave me an Idea and my Idea was writing to you. Please Mrs. Roosevelt answer my letter, and please oh please say yes that you'll try your hardest. God will never forget you in the next world. And what you do for your father and mother will never be forgotton. My father is also a sickly man, he had two nervous breakdowns but never got over the second one. But I am a healthy child. I am fourteen years old. blue eyes, about sixty in. tall, weigh 105 1/2 pds, hair is long and curly sort of natural the color is light brown my complexion is very white. I have big eyes. Please trust in me with all your heart and I will trust in you with all my heart. Please just for my Little mother. (That's what I call her because she is so small.)

If you the Secretary should open this letter Before Mrs. Roosevelt please give it to her.  
Thank you.

A Little Girl who is still Unknown and Just Became Your Friend  
J. I. A.

Milltown, N.J.  
March 25, 1935

My dearest President and Mrs Roosevelt;

Just a few lines to let you know, I am in good health, wishing this letter will find you all well.

Mrs and Pres. Roosevelt, in the first place I must tell you my name, O.C. - 14 years old.

I am writing to you Pres. and Mrs Roosevelt, to ask if I may ask one question, but I must first tell you my story.

Well you see Pres. and Mrs Roosevelt, I was doctoring for a while, with out my Mother and Dad knowing it, in fact they don't know it yet, & I owe Dr. Forney, \$7.50. I haven't any idea how to earn this amount, I was doctoring for an infected arm. Every time I went the Dr. charged me \$1.50, & I went 5 times.

Could you kindly please help me Pres. and Mrs Roosevelt. Please don't write to my parents about me owing this money. But if you will kindly help me I will greatly, & certainly appreciate it. If you help me Pres. and Mrs Roosevelt, send my note or your letter, to this address.

O. C.  
Milltown Public School  
Milltown, N.J.

I will certinally appreate your help.

Let me tell you one more thing, Pres. and Mrs Roosevelt, this summer aunt Joan, is going to take me on a vacation down at West Virginia, & while were going, I'll stop in and visit you, and then you can see who I am. Hows that?

Pres. and Mrs Roosevelt, could you please send this amount by April 5. I'd like to pay this out, before my parents receive a bill from the Docters office. O.K. Please.

Sincerely, yours,  
O. C.

Columbus, Ohio  
Sept. 2, 1935

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am a little girl 12 years old. I would like to have a bicycle so much.

My Daddy has been out of work for such a long time and now he is only working 2 + 3 days a week and cannot afford to buy one for me.

So I am working hard to earn one, by selling 9, 3 year subscriptions for the "Ladies Home Journal or The Saturday Evening Post.

I know you are a wonderful lady. I always read all I can about you. I love to read about great people so much. I wonder if you would subscribe for these magazine, and help me earn a bicycle, I surely will appreciate your kindness.

I will be waiting to hear from you.

I am E. E.

Metheun, Mass.  
Mar. 31, 1935

Dear President and Mrs. Roosevelt.

The favor I am about to ask you is one which I consider a great one. I am asking if you could possibly send me a girl's bicycle. The school which I attend is very far and I am not very healthy I often get pains in my sides. My father only works two days a week and there are six in my family, it is impossible in almost every way that I can get a bicycle! I am in the eighth grade and am very fond of school. Sometimes I have to miss school on account of the walk so far. I have often thought things would pick up and father might be able to get me a bicycle, but instead they have grown worse. I assure you that the bicycle shall not be used as a pleasure but as a necessity.

I shall be waiting patiently, for my greatest wish to be granted, as I feel sure that you cannot and will not turn me down. Please try to send it to me.

I shall remain

Sincerely yours,  
M. B.

Sikeston, Missouri  
January 20, 1938

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I am writing this letter in hopes that you will answer in my favor.

My father H. C. has been in bed from a stroke for almost a year. We have no money and my brother works but makes \$3.00 a week and there are eight in our family.

My step-mother is very good to me and I try to help her. She takes in washings and I have to walk for six or eight blocks and then carry the washings home. I have to go of a morning before school and it has been very cold here. If you could send me a bicycle to ride when I go after washings for her I shall appreciate it. I am in eighth grade at school and work very hard to make passing grades. The Principal of the school bought two of my sisters and me a pair of slippers so we would not have to stay at home. If you would do this for me I shall be able to help my step-mother more. If you send me one I would like a girls bicycle. I am about 4 feet 3 inches tall so if you send me one you can judge as to what size.

Loving and appreciating-  
A. L. C.

STANTONVILLE TENN

DEAR MRS. PRESIDENT

I AM A LITTLE GIRL 5 YEARS OLD I HAVE A LITTLE BROTHER HE CALLS ME  
SISTIE I CALL HIM BUZZIE. AFTER YOUR LITTLE GRAND CHILDREN. I WISH  
I HAD A SHIRLEY TEMPLE DOLL. DADY CANT NOT BUY ONE

I LOVE YOU

P. A. C.

Mason, Wisconsin  
January 9, 1934

Dear Mrs. F. Roosevelt,

I suppose you'll be kind of surprised to hear from a poor little girl. I am ten years old. On Christmas eve I had wished for Santa Clause to come but my mama said the chimney was blocked & he couldn't come, so I had a poor Christmas. I was expecting Santa to bring me some things.

I lost my daddy when I was two years old.

I have read in the papers how good you are to the poor and thought maybe you can help me some. I will appreciate it all my life.

To-day we have started school from our Christmas vacation & all the children talk about how many presants Santa has brought them & I felt so bad cause I had nothing to say. I guess that is all. My address is

R#2, Box 7  
Mason, Wisconsin

Yours truly,  
M. A

42-06 159 Street  
Flushing, New York  
Mar. 22, 1934

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

Please excuse the paper. I have never asked anybody for anything before and I feel kind of awkward writing this so please excuse any mistakes.

I am in the second term in Flushing High School and have managed to buy notebooks and pad so far. This being the spring term spring football is in session. This being my favorite sport I am trying out for the team. I managed to loan from a boy friend shoulder pad, helmet, and football pants but he didn't have any luck in securing a pair of football shoes. Practise started yesterday. I wore sneakers and had my ankle cut by a fellow with shoe's on. I came home last night and spoke to my parents about getting a pair of shoes.

I'm sure they would like me to have these but my father, who works three days a week makes only \$13.44 on the Long Island State Park Commission said we could not afford them.

I thought one of your sons may have an old pair of football shoes they do not use now. I wear size eight.

Please answer even if you can't do anything for me.

Thanking you in advance,  
C. K.