"Eleanor's Million Dollar Gift"
Monongalia County's
1938 School Bond

by

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ABSTRACT: With the aid of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a revolutionary idea arrived in Monongalia County in 1938. The Million Dollar School Building Project of 1938 was the largest undertaking in the United States where a county attempted to overhaul its entire edifice of education. Ironically, in the depth of the Great Depression, Monongalia County built a school infrastructure which still thrives today. Monongalia County has benefited greatly from this Works Progress Administration Program. Without the program and the initial vision of Eleanor Roosevelt, the quality of education provided to the people of the county would have suffered. "Eleanor's Million Dollar Gift" has been one for the century.
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According to records, 1938 was a year of significant changes in education for Monongalia County. As U.S. Route 119 was completed and more roads became paved, one-room schools were closed and pupils were transported to consolidated schools by bus. This resulted in overcrowding, (Core, 111) but improvements were also being made. As teachers became better qualified, a good health system was initiated and hot lunches were provided by many schools to greet these new outstanding teachers. The truly great changes came after a $600,000 school bond issue was passed by county voters on August 2. This bond issue was proposed when it became apparent during the spring of 1938 that Federal W.P.A. Funds would be available for school construction. Following a series of public meetings and discussions, the Monongalia County Board of Education decided to place the bond issue before the voters was the best option for the future of the Monongalia County Schools. (Stevenson, Book Ten, 135) In addition to this levy, a special levy would be presented to the voters as well. The special bond called for a 50% increase in the levy over a period of three years for general repair of the existing schools.

The need for both of these levies stemmed from terms set in the 1932 Tax Limitation Amendment, properly termed the "General Property Classification and Tax Limitation Amendment" which placed a maximum limit on the rates at which all real and personal property can be taxed (Ambler, 607). This amendment passed the State Legislature because of the great public outcry over rising
tax rates during the Depression Era. The 1932 Amendment to the State Constitution required West Virginia school districts to rely heavily on state support since local taxation rights were limited (League of Women Voters, 15). Often times, as was the case with Monongalia County in 1938, the income from the taxes combined with state funding proved to be too little capital. As a result, many schools and school systems were severely underfunded.

In light of the need for additional funding support, Monongalia County decided to be inventive and proposed the two levies before their voters for a decision. The August 2 vote was the first in West Virginia since the passage of the 1932 Limitation Amendment to address the issue of levies for building new facilities with a combination of local and federal funds on a county-wide basis. Its outcome would signal a new era of educational funding ventures as counties throughout the state and the nation followed suit and launched similar programs.

As was the case with many of Monongalia County's advances (including social work on Scott's Run) during this period, it was First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt who proved to be the catalyst in the initiative. When Eleanor Roosevelt came back to deliver a commencement address at nearby Arthurdale High School's graduation on May 27, she decided to make several stops in Monongalia County. These included the dedication of the Negro Central High School in Westover, observation of the Blacksville High School pottery classes, and inspection of the Morgantown High School field project (Dominion News, 27 March 1938, 1). Most significantly, however, was her encouragement of the School Board to seek WPA funding for
a county-wide school building project.

Just as her words sang sweet music to those graduating students at Arthurdale, her voice added the strength necessary to undertake such an ambitious project. Her dreams of improving the lives of the people of Monongalia County, and especially Scott's Run, could be fulfilled with a successful levy and subsequent building project.

A successful levy could spell the answer to needs touched upon in a 1935 "School Board Needs Survey" which addressed educational needs including school locations and sizes (Stevenson, Book Ten, 135). Mrs. Roosevelt's vision inspired the Superintendent of Schools and his administrative staff to battle fiercely to fulfill those needs of the county, which included development of junior high school centers and the enhancement of existing facilities at the numerous elementary schools and high schools in the county.

As with any levy, a strong campaign was necessary for success. Therefore, to meet these ends, "various studies were made, a speaker's bureau was organized by the Board, and a general campaign for acquainting the people (of Monongalia County) with the needs of the school was carried on during the hot summer months (Stevenson, Book Ten, 135).

The Dominion News and the Morgantown Post were very helpful in the campaign to convince the voter to approve the levy approval. Editorials, especially those that appeared close to the election, such as one that urged voters to "Exercise Your Right" (Dominion News, 1 August 1938, 8), were invaluable throughout the months before the vote. The Morgantown Post editor, Brooks Cottle, even
went so far as to "plead for the approval of the bond issue, as well as the excess levy over Radio Station WMMN" in Fairmont (Dominion News, 2 August 1938, 1). The newspapers also included charts, tables, and graphs to allow for better public understanding on the facts of the bond issues. Pamphlets were also distributed to voters by concerned townspeople to assist the School Board in their efforts. Even some West Virginia University students pitched in (Lee).

Articles and editorials in the local newspapers took great pain to point out that school bond and excess levy would provide for "necessary painting, roofing, underpinning, plumbing, installation of water, heating and lighting, as well as the needed new buildings" (Stevenson, Book Ten, 135). It was commonly pointed out that 90% of all of the buildings in the county were in dire need of repairs. In fact, the whole school system's facilities throughout the entire system seems to have fallen into shambles after a decade of suffering during the Great Depression (Bush).

As evidence of these claims, "photographs were taken, showing the dilapidated conditions of the existing buildings and these photographs were displayed in the store windows." Additionally, "a travelling exhibit of photographs of these buildings was taken by the speakers to the various mass meetings held throughout the county" (Stevenson, Book Ten, 136). Throughout the campaign, Superintendent Floyd Cox and others, emphasized that during the past five years high school enrollment had increased by 67% (Dominion News, 1 August 1938, 1). Cox called the public's attention to the fact that it was highly desirable to locate
buildings where the boys and girls lived and thereby eliminate as much of the transportation as possible -- a thought which seems to have dissolved in the subsequent policy and practice of consolidation, but may be in need of some rekindling today.

There was great concern, however, that in an off-year election, voter turn-out would be very limited. It was hoped that the addition of two non-educational bond issues to the ballot would help increase voter turn-out. These bonds were to have provided for the County Courthouse and the County Hospital at figures of $69,000 and $138,000 respectively. It was thought that due to their lesser funding needs, these two bonds would pass quite easily and help increase voter turn-out for the school issues.

As was the case with many communities and counties during the Great Depression, there was a great need for improvements to and enlargements of those most important gathering centers of the community: auditoriums, community centers, playgrounds, and recreational facilities which placed the school at the core of community identity. Improved facilities would not only enhance the educational experiences of the school-aged youths, but also help reunite communities torn apart by the Depression. The bond and the excess levy would provide support for these community concerns as well.

By evaluating the proposals on the basis of necessity, twenty-one separate projects were decided upon should the bond pass. Each project was to be constructed as a fire-proof facility with the latest technologies in lighting, heating, and ventilation (Stevenson, Book Ten, 138). In addition, it was hoped that the
special levy would provide for increases in the salaries of both teachers and janitors. In 1937-1938, teachers made $19.80 per week over a twelve month pay period and janitors received $560.00 per year. These salaries were totally inadequate, prompting many top teachers to leave the county for better pay. Moreover, the excess levy was necessary to guarantee a full nine months' school term for the three years to follow. The standing of the Monongalia County High Schools within the North Central Association could be called into question if this nine-month term were not fully funded.

As the campaign continued and numerous speakers joined in support of the program, the issues of health and education became dominant. Speakers, all community leaders, pointed out that the well-being of the 12,000 young people in Monongalia County meant more to the future generations than a few dollars saved to the taxpayers (Morgantown Post, 1 August 1938, 3). Although this sentiment continues to pervade our society today, it has been a lesser force, as can be seen from the results of the recent levy campaigns throughout the state.

Additionally, advocates stressed that this bond issue was a rare opportunity to take advantage of federal W.P.A. funding and if the opportunity to improve the school facilities through this mechanism, there might not be a second chance in the future. Since the bond issue would be matched by a 45% federal grant, it was pointed out that Monongalia County needed to obtain its "rightful share" of federal monies which would be spent in other cities, counties, and states (Morgantown Post, 1 August 1938, 1). Argued as well was the fact that, due in part to the presence of West
Virginia University, Monongalia County was a progressive educational community. This was an opportunity for Monongalia County to blaze trails nationally. The project could serve as a "source of pride as the most up-to-date school models in the nation" (Morgantown Post, 1 August 1938, 1). This venture was, therefore, a truly pioneering event not only in the state, but also one of the first of its sort in the nation.

The survey completed to evaluate the needs of the county and identify the twenty-one projects to be designated was quite a undertaking itself. This survey included a study of the distribution of the school population, the population trends in various sections of the county over the past three or four decades, the existing educational facilities with the attached school enrollments, and the location of new buildings and additions with their probable enrollments. Then, the study addressed the types of buildings required, accounting for the number of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, auditoriums, and gymnasiums necessary at each site. Further, the size of these facilities was addressed with particular care by the superintendent's administrative staff.

Magnifying the importance of the construction, the county also decided to revamp its educational system from an 8-4 model to a 6-3-3 graded plan. This organizational change caused there to be a request for the aforementioned junior high school facilities. It was thought that this 6-3-3 plan would better educational attainment levels among our young people. Interestingly enough, this plan is no longer being used in Monongalia County as the school system has since reverted to the 8-4 plan. This new model
meant that painstaking decisions had to be made regarding the proposed locations of these junior high schools. Cottle insisted that "the status of the existing educational facilities, the modernization of existing buildings and the selection of an architect for the new facilities were problems of paramount concern" (Morgantown Post, 23 May 1938, 6).

As Cottle and others preached the gospel of this program in the newspapers, the Superintendent's Office released publicity to the public providing facts, information, and statistics on the problems presented to the planning group and the connection of these issues to the project. Four hot summer months passed quickly and the day of the vote came into sight. Cottle, Cox, and others actively campaigned well into the twilight of August 1 and throughout the day on August 2 to ensure that the two educational issues and the two other bonds would pass. To aid in this cause, public discussion meetings were scheduled for the night of August 1, 1938 at Smithtown, Harmony Grove, Daybrook, and Bakers Ridge (Dominion News, 1 August 1938, 1).

It was believed that turnout for the day would be close to fifty percent of registered voters and that the issues would have little trouble passing (Dominion News, 1 August 1938, 1). Sadly, however, this was not to be the case. As the results from the polls began to come in to the Monongalia County Courthouse on the evening of August 2, 1938, all three proposed bond issues were expected to pass easily. The Dominion News reported that with only nine precincts unreported, all of the bond issues seemed to be leading by a two-to-one advantage. The special levy was not
fortunate. It did not come close to achieving the 60% yea vote necessary for passage (Dominion News, 3 August 1938, 1), and so the ills of the school system would remain unsolved.

Even before all of the results came in, it was obvious that voting turnout did not live up to the 50% expectation called for only a day before the election. As Walter Hart, editor of the Dominion News, wrote before the final results were tallied, "voters did not come up to advanced expectations" (Dominion News, 3 August 1938, 1). One day later, on August 4, 1938, the election results looked even worse. Missing only two relatively small precincts from Bakers Ridge and Wana, two bond issues were assured of passage, while the other bond issue and the special school levy seemed destined for failure. The $600,000 school bond issue and the $138,000 County Hospital bond were assured of passage each having gained support far in excess of the minimum 60% affirmative vote required for passage. Meanwhile, the $69,000 Courthouse bond issue and the special school levy were doomed to failure (Dominion News, 4 August 1938, 1). This came as quite a surprise to many citizens who believed that the success of the two non-school issues was assured and that the success of the two school-related issues were tied to one another.

On the positive side, however, approval of the bond issue meant that $600,000 in bonds would be available to match the Federal W.P.A. Funds thereby allowing for the school building program. The defeat of special levy, on the other hand, meant that repairing and remodeling old buildings was severely hampered. Under W.P.A. funding formula, existing buildings could not be
repaired or remodeled. This meant that the plans for the new facilities had to be even better to compensate for the lack of repairs made to the existing units which were destined to remain in a state of disrepair.

Following the success of the levy, Tucker & Silling, an architectural firm of Charleston, West Virginia, was chosen to design the plans for the twenty-one new buildings. These plans had to conform to the educational survey submissions and were checked from time to time to ensure that they would remain within the budget and still meet the educational needs of the youth of the county (Stevenson, Book Ten, 137).

Thus, a new auditorium, said to be the finest facility of its sort in the state, was constructed at Morgantown High School at a cost of $109,075.41. The Morgantown High School Auditorium had a large stage comparable to the best theaters, could seat 1,400 people, and featured the finest acoustical, decorative, and lighting effects of its time (Petropolous).

A modern senior high school was constructed at Blacksville to serve residents of the Clay and Battelle districts at a cost of nearly $120,000. The Clay-Battelle High School featured thirteen classrooms, an auditorium, gymnasium, vocational agricultural facilities, home economics rooms, science laboratories, ceramics shops, and a library. Also included in the mixture were shower and locker facilities for both boys and girls (Stevenson, Book Ten, 137).

Junior high schools benefited greatly from the plan as had been intended. A new $100,000 junior high school was constructed
for the Suncrest area. The Suncrest-Platts Junior High School contained ten classrooms, a sizeable combination gymnasium-auditorium, science laboratories, home economics rooms, libraries, lockers, and showers (Stevenson, Book Ten, 137). The Osage and Cassville Junior High Schools on Scott's Run were built to help enhance existing elementary schools. Similar in design, both buildings provided eight additional classrooms and educational opportunities for the residents of the county's largest mining community. Both included some features into Suncrest-Platts School (Stevenson, Book Ten, 137). In addition, new elementary schools were constructed at Osage, Riverside, Sabraton, and Everettville.

New "negro" schools, as they were called in those days, also were constructed at Osage, Everettville, and Morgantown. New buildings and additions were assembled at Browns Chapel, Smithstown, National, Laurel Point, Suncrest, Mt. Pleasant, Wiles Hill, First Ward, and Second Ward. The average costs of these buildings was $18,000 per facility.

With the new elementary schools at Osage Negro, Second Ward Negro, Everettville Negro, Browns Chapel, National, Laurel Point and Suncrest all receiving four rooms a piece and the new Smithstown facility, two, the level of education for the youngest school-aged children was likely to increase. Similarly, the additions at Wiles Hill and First Ward of three rooms and Second Ward and Seneca of two rooms, enhanced the educational opportunities at those schools (Stevenson, Book Ten, 138).

In all, the costs of this major construction program including "preliminary expenses, architect's fees, cost of land, water wells,
costs of installing water lines, and sewerage disposal fields" ran to a sum of over one million dollars (Stevenson, Book Ten, 1938). One hundred four new rooms were added to accommodate over 4,000 boys and girls, which at that time equaled one-third of the County School Population. Quite an achievement made possible only by the $1,034,284.31 in funding acquired through the tireless work of Superintendent Floyd Cox, including federal funds amounting to $465,427.94 (Dominion News, 1 August 1938, 3).

Modern educational and leisure time facilities were now available to youngsters. All of the elementary schools, including the two-room structures, had "toilet facilities for boys and girls, a P.T.A. kitchen, a large hall, a central heating plant, and auditorium" made possible by opening folding doors between the two classrooms (Stevenson, Book Ten, 139). All classrooms were equipped with blackboards, stickboards, and cloak rooms. The communities benefited greatly because these facilities served as excellent new meeting places for P.T.A. s and others. All of the new buildings were centrally heated, a rarity in those days (Bush).

Lighting for these new buildings was exceptional. Designed to allow for a maximum of natural light to penetrate the building, the artificial lighting was designed and placed so as not to incur glare. All window frames were of steel construction and all furnace rooms are shut off from the rest of the building by fire-doors, a new innovation in school construction. The corridors were made of concrete and mastic, while the floors of these hallways were constructed with concrete and polished maple flooring. The toilet facilities were the latest approved type and "absolutely
sanitary". All of the new buildings in the rural sections were equipped and outfitted with septic tanks, sewage disposal system fields, and the latest in other sanitary options (Stevenson, Book Ten, 139).

In the words of the Assistant Superintendent, Floyd Cox, "This building program has enabled us to revise our educational program in the county and while all of the buildings are not as yet equipped as we desire them, yet we do have a beautiful school plant. If we had the funds with which to repair and remodel our existing buildings, or if the special levy had been approved by the voters, we would have as fine a building plant as exists in any county in the state" (Dominion News, 24 May 1940, 1).

As additional funding for badly needed furniture and equipment was sought during the spring, the 1938 program drew to a close. The total expenditures for the project on May 23, 1940 was $1,046,000.00. This was the date selected for dedication of the final project completed -- the Morgantown High School Auditorium. The featured speaker at this dedication ceremony was none other than First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, the initiator of the program.

Dedication of West Virginia Project 1194-F for Monongalia County Schools, was formally conducted on May 23, 1940 at 8:30 p.m. in the Morgantown High School Auditorium. In addition to Mrs. Roosevelt, featured speakers included: Assistant Superintendent Floyd Cox, W.P.A. Regional Director D.R. Kennicott, Board of Education President R.S. Tibbs, Superintendent Robert Clark, and Morgantown High School Principal Walter Riddle. Advance information on the dedication ceremony was provided by both
Morgantown newspapers with the help of the Office of U.S. Representative Jennings Randolph, who accompanied the First Lady on her trip to West Virginia. Other stops on the brief tour included a commencement address at University High School, a commencement address at Arthurdale (her favorite homestead project), a tour of Scott's Run, a banquet at the downtown Hotel Morgan, meetings with the Preston County Board of Education and the Survey Department at Arthurdale, and the Tygart Valley homestead (Dominion News, 22 May 1940, 1).

Perhaps, her most intriguing visit prior to the dedication ceremony was an informal visit with West Virginia University President Charles Lawall and students at the Beta Theta Pi Fraternity house. At this stop, she discussed for a few moments the European War, stressing that she believed "that in light of present conditions, rearmament is necessary" (Dominion News, 22 May 1940, 1). She added that this should not steer our national focus away from building our infrastructure and added that she hoped that more W.P.A. funding would come to West Virginia. On this point, she chose to focus her address at the dedication ceremony.

The most telling comments at the dedication came from then Assistant Superintendent and former and future Superintendent Floyd Cox when he stated that "the new buildings we now have are permanent and will last for many years to come. The citizens and taxpayers of Monongalia County have received dollar for dollar value for the money spent and have made one of the best investments possible. Giving boys and girls added opportunities and educational advantages which they have never had before is the
greatest investment which we can make in the future of our American democracy, and this is the kind of an investment Monongalia County has made in its future" (Stevenson, Book Ten, 142).

When evaluated in the context of its historical significance, the Million Dollar Project can not be judged as a complete success. In 1979, all of the buildings constructed during the 1938-40 period were still in use for their original purpose. Finally in 1980, exactly forty years later, another significant bond issue for buildings was passed in Monongalia County. This bond issue led to the replacement of the Flatts Elementary School and the Morgantown Junior High School facilities, both of which had aged considerably since construction. The new facilities, North Elementary School and South Junior High School, have not met public expectations. Both of these buildings have cracked and sunk due to inferior workmanship by the contractors. This was not the case with the W.P.A buildings which were constructed by the work teams during this era were soundly constructed remain so today.

Perhaps more significant, however, was the revolutionary idea of the Million Dollar Project. Before 1938, such a large undertaking where a county attempted to overhaul the entire edifice of education, had not been seen in West Virginia, nor the nation for that matter. It is a feat whose shear proportions which have yet to be matched in this state. Today, one would be hard pressed to find newspaper editors campaigning for educational initiatives. In fact, one would have to stretch the bounds of reality to envision even adequate coverage given to the issue in the newspapers. Ironically, in the depth of the Great Depression, one
would not find a time where education was valued at such an extraordinary personal cost, and there may be a lesson in that. This period in Monongalia County was truly one of great advances in education. While it is not possible to evaluate the initial effects of these buildings on the educational well-being of the children of Monongalia County due to a lack of records, it is obvious that without this program the quality of the education provided to the people would have suffered -- as well as the people of Monongalia County. Eleanor Roosevelt and her "Million Dollar Project" played a the key role in establishing Monongalia County as an educational showcase for West Virginia. Without her encouragement and the W.P.A. funding which she helped the county to acquire, Monongalia County would be in great need of many buildings and facilities today. "Eleanor's Million Dollar Gift" has been one for the century.
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