

FDR, ER, and VC

By Elizabeth Adams Daniels '41

“My dear Dr. MacCracken” wrote Franklin D. Roosevelt from a Florida houseboat in February 1923 to the then president of Vassar College, Henry Noble MacCracken. “Your letter of February 21st has finally found me down among the Florida keys, and though I have had no official communication from the Secretary of the Board of Trustees, I am more than pleased with the action of the Board of Trustees at their last meeting. It is going to be a great pleasure for me to come into closer association with Vassar College, and I am particularly looking forward, also, to seeing you more frequently and more intimately. Naturally, also I am hopeful that I will be able to help in bringing the college into closer ties with Dutchess County. Until you came to Vassar, we who had lived in the neighborhood for many years knew little about the college or its work. In fact, for most of us, Vassar might just as well have been a thousand miles away.”

At the time he wrote this letter accepting appointment to the Board of Trustees for Vassar College, FDR was in private life after an unsuccessful election campaign in 1920 as the vice presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket; he was also in recovery after being stricken with poliomyelitis in 1921.

Roosevelt, who had served nearly three one-year terms as a state senator in New York and, from 1913 to 1920, was assistant secretary of the navy to President Woodrow Wilson, was invited to join the Vassar board largely, as MacCracken wrote to him, because Vassar was in “great need of trustees who are neighbors of the college.” FDR’s acceptance of a position on the Vassar College Board of Trustees in 1923 began an association between the college and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt that persisted through his subsequent terms as governor of New York and president of the United States; indeed, it was an affiliation that lasted their lifetimes. While Franklin was a trustee, active and then honorary, from 1923 until his death in 1945, Eleanor, too, was a friend and frequent visitor to the campus until her death in 1962. In the first years of the association, Franklin had more to do with the college than did Eleanor; in time, especially after he was elected United States president, it was the other way around.

Franklin Roosevelt served on a typical array of trustee committees. His first assignment, which capitalized on his extensive Dutchess County connections, was to chair what was called a County Committee. FDR’s task was to make plans for a county day at the college; the objective was to bring the college into closer connection with its neighbors. When the day came—October 4, 1924—more than two hundred residents of the county visited the college—many probably for the first time. They were received by administration and trustees in Main Building, guided around the campus by students, and at four o’clock in the Outdoor Theater, saw a performance of a play written by Hallie Flanagan, who would join the English department, teaching drama, the next year. (In 1935, Roosevelt would appoint Flanagan director of the Federal Theater Project.)

Other Vassar assignments for FDR included service on the Committee on Building, which, in the early twenties, was considering construction of a dining commons in the center of the quadrangle. (For various reasons, this was never built.) He briefly chaired the short-lived Committee on Religious Life (it quickly evolved into the Committee on Undergraduate Life) and presided over discussions in which compulsory attendance at chapel was under scrutiny. FDR was still on the committee, though not chairman when compulsory chapel attendance was abolished in 1926.

He endorsed the assistance lent by Vassar College to the founding of Sarah Lawrence as an experimental college when the question was brought to the Vassar trustees in 1926. Sarah Lawrence, with MacCracken and four Vassar trustees on its board was founded that year. Roosevelt believed that the development of junior colleges—of which Sarah Lawrence was to be one—was the next logical nationwide development in education.

A more controversial issue on campus—smoking—was the topic in 1929, when Roosevelt, by then governor of New York State, was a member of the Committee on Undergraduate Life. The committee that year granted permission for students to smoke in designated places on campus (there would be a smoking room in every dormitory on campus). He also served on the newly formed Endowment Committee, which in due course developed an Endowment Office.

In addition to his trustee duties, Roosevelt gave several speeches at Vassar. On June 10, 1931, for example, then in his second term as governor, he gave a short commencement speech in the chapel on the theme that study is like navigation.

Study implies not what we are doing today but what we are to do in days to come. Some people call it planning, an equally good word is navigation, and one cannot arrive at the desired point without it.

In 1932, Vassar's local trustee was elected president of the United States. MacCracken, realizing that Roosevelt's attention to Vassar would necessarily decrease, determined on a course of action to keep FDR interested in remaining on the board as an honorary member. In April 1933, MacCracken sent a short but pithy progress report to the White House about how town-gown projects were going: the students were making surveys and working for the local agencies, and the college was opening its doors more widely to townspeople for concerts, lectures, and forums.

In August 1933, the college hosted a big reception for President Roosevelt. MacCracken was invited to go up to Hyde Park and progress with FDR by car to the campus. The smiling Roosevelt gave him a lesson in how to pose most effectively for photographs: first greet people on one side as the car drives through the gathered crowds, then on the other. "You'll learn," Roosevelt said to MacCracken as the two of them had a wonderful time—fellow masters of histrionics.

During these Depression years, MacCracken would point out to Roosevelt signs at Vassar of economic recovery: advance registration for future classes, he pointed out in a letter in 1934, was the largest in over ten years, and fewer students needed aid.

Yet this amity between the college and Roosevelt was challenged as World War II approached. In May 1940, seventy-five Vassar College students signed a letter to FDR protesting his views of the role that the United States should play in the European conflict. MacCracken's stand on American involvement in the coming war was similarly in direct conflict with FDR's policy. Although he did not accept a proffered place on the America First Board, MacCracken's pacifist views were with the antiwar movement.

Dean C. Mildred Thompson '03, on the other hand, was very openly in favor of Roosevelt's policy and, together with 125 faculty members, signed a letter of support several months before

the war was declared. Pearl Harbor sharply ended any open divisiveness, but MacCracken and Roosevelt did not resume their former sunny relationship.

As FDR's gubernatorial and presidential jobs caused him to be absent from Dutchess County much of the time, his visits to the college became less frequent. Nevertheless, he seems to have kept an interest in Vassar. In 1943 on August 7th at 6:20 "on a quiet summer evening" as reported in the *Miscellany News* in September of that year, George Fratz, the gatemen, "waved a shiny black limousine" through Taylor Gate.

In the tonneau sat the President dressed in a plain dark suit, flanked by Mrs. Churchill and the Prime Minister's daughter, Subaltern Mary Churchill.

The Prime Minister sat alone on one of the small seats in the middle of the car, wearing a light palm beach suit and hat. It is to be noted that, perhaps in deference to the 1500 absent young ladies of Vassar, he was not smoking a long black cigar.

According to Mr. Fratz, the limousine was followed by seven staff cars...The entourage drove straight to Main, stopped for several minutes in front of the Soap Palace [an entry to Main Building that no longer exists], and then returned and disappeared through Taylor Gate.

One can imagine that Roosevelt, a Dutchess County history buff as well as a Vassar trustee, was busy explaining to Churchill that Matthew Vassar was born in England in 1792 and emigrated with his family to Dutchess County in 1796.

It would be unfair to assert that Eleanor Roosevelt came to campus just to keep her finger on the student pulse for Franklin in his absence. She had her own agenda, and her involvement with the college and with students promoted it. In November 1937, for example, the Vassar Political Association was holding a conference on housing; Secretary Harold Ickes was the keynote speaker. It was arranged that ER would precede him as a speaker; her topic was community housing, a subject appropriate to her earlier service on the advisory board of the New York City Housing Authority. (For the occasion, the new Social Museum in Blodgett Hall exhibited a show prepared by the Works Progress Administration on housing.)

One of Eleanor Roosevelt's primary concerns was the constructive engagement of youth in political debate and political action, an objective that was also high on MacCracken's list. Like her, he believed that students should examine their thinking and then put their ideas into action.

Thus it was the Second World Youth Congress, held on the Vassar campus in August 1938, that created a primary link between MacCracken and ER. Announced as a congress "to prevent war and organize peace," the meeting attracted an estimated five hundred delegates from around the world, though none from Germany, Japan or Italy. Some of the delegates were said by the congress's director to be communists.

This latter fact elicited hostility, antagonism, and threats to withdraw support among alumnae of a more conservative bent than MacCracken and certainly among the by-and-large Republican and conservative Poughkeepsie community. Telegrams and cablegrams flew back and forth; accusations were made and answered. Helen Kenyon '05, chair of the Vassar board, issued a public statement of support of the Vassar trustees and the president and his project.

At the congress, MacCracken's ally, Eleanor Roosevelt, made the opening address. After "hailing the world's youth as the best agents for peace," she attended the rest of the sessions, sitting in the back of the room, knitting; she watched the folk dances, listened to student analysis and argumentation. She had several sessions with small groups of representatives and publicly defended herself and MacCracken against accusations of being dupes of the Communist Party. She was pleased with the results of the conference.

In 1941, ER, again prompted by her desire to involve youth constructively in debate about public policy, advocated the program of a different youth organization—the International Student Service (ISS). The Roosevelts donated the use of their summer home in Campobello in the summer of 1941 for the ISS conference on youth leadership. Two Vassar students attended: Jane Plimpton '42 and Blythe Morley '44.

In November 1941, the Vassar Political Association and the ISS were hosts to eighteen colleges on the Vassar campus at a conference that addressed morale problems of the draftee; ER came and talked informally with student representatives at tea.

Eleanor Roosevelt, during these years, developed a special friendship with C. Mildred Thompson. The two frequently exchanged greetings, messages, visits, and visitors to the country. As dean of the college, Thompson was in a position to encourage students to invite the president's wife to meetings where social issues or politics were involved and to call upon her large experience in looking at contemporary issues. On March 21, 1941, for example, ER came to the campus and spoke to a faculty/student group on "The Role of Women in the National Emergency."

In 1944, Franklin Roosevelt asked Thompson to be a member of an international delegation meeting in England to discuss issues of education in the anticipated post-World War II period. That group, the United Nations Organization for Educational and Cultural Reconstruction, thereafter sent a tentative draft of its recommendations to the governments of the United Nations for their reaction. Upon Thompson's returning from the meeting, ER sent her a letter expressing pleasure at her performance.

That fall, at the Poughkeepsie Post Office, the evening before election day at the close of Roosevelt's campaign for a fourth term, it was Mildred Thompson, rather than Henry Noble MacCracken who acted as spokesperson for the Dutchess County Democrats and introduced the Roosevelts to the crowd.

During the war and for the remainder of Franklin Roosevelt's life, the Vassar president maintained his official contact with Roosevelt. When FDR died in April 1945, MacCracken led the college memorial service for its most honored trustee and longtime friend.

Eleanor Roosevelt continued her association with the college. She frequently visited the Summer Institute of Euthenics, delighting especially in chatting with the children in the Wimpfheimer Nursery School yard. Indeed, the summer after Franklin's death she served on the institute's faculty, delivering a lecture on housing and, three mornings a week, acting as co-leader with Clarice Leavell Pennock '19, of a seminar on community organization. (Mrs. Pennock would become director of field work at Vassar in 1949.)

After MacCracken retired in 1946, Eleanor Roosevelt and Sarah Gibson Blanding, MacCracken's successor, meeting one day in the club car of the New York Central on the way to New York, struck up a friendship that was very congenial. Thereafter, ER was several times a

visitor in the president's house, dining there in, for instance, with Edward R. Murrow before both were to speak in the chapel

It seems appropriate to conclude this account of past Vassar/Roosevelt ties with a more recent connection. In the fall of 1991, Mary Hart Keeley '41, was the recipient of the Eleanor Roosevelt Medal for Community Service for her work in organizing Dutchess Outreach, an organization providing "emergency food, clothing, and furniture to those in sudden need" in Dutchess County and for her many other activities in Poughkeepsie. The presentation was made at Val Kill, Eleanor Roosevelt's beautiful cottage in Hyde Park, which Joyce Ghee '52 and others helped to preserve and make a public place to be enjoyed as a historic site and to be used by people engaged in causes that Eleanor Roosevelt would have approved. The award forged a new link with the Vassar past in which both Roosevelts played neighborly roles.