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Agents of Modernization in the Florida Keys: FERA, The American Red Cross, and the Concrete Hurricane Houses

by Anne Marie Sowder and Raja R.A. Issa

On a warm but mostly cloudy October night in 1935, record-breaking crowds danced at a new club on the boulevard in Key West. While friends swayed to “slow fox trots and waltzes,”¹ eighty miles north-east, along the railway route between Key West and Miami, lay the debris of storm-tossed houses, a destroyed railroad, and ruined highway system. Initially predicted to hit Key West, the storm had instead hit the Upper Keys in the complete darkness of night, September 2, 1935, Labor Day weekend. Producing the lowest barometric pressure ever recorded over land in North America,² its 200-mile-per-hour winds and crushing surge leveled buildings, tossed rail cars off their tracks, and killed at least 400 people. The dead included many from the tightly knit “conch families” community of Upper Keys dwellers, and hundreds of federal relief laborers, largely World War I veterans, encamped

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1 “Many Attend Grand Opening at Raul’s,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935..

2 “Florida Keys Hurricanes of the Last Millennium - City of Key West, FL,” accessed 2021.

in canvas tents near their construction sites. With national investigations in the works following up on the deaths of hundreds of veterans, local officials prioritized transportation needs for what they hoped would be a “banner tourist season.”³ For dancers at the club and other residents, relief at being spared was descending into panic and depression as they realized their practical isolation, a different kind of existential threat. The Florida East Coast Railroad (FEC) connecting them to peninsular Florida was in ruins. The highway system, supplemented at intervals by an island-hopping ferry service, was unusable. Many Keys residents favored repair of the railroad, but a competing proposal supported construction of a raised “super-highway” for cars, to replace the crippled train line. The highway would run along the FEC railroad right-of-way. “Many people who favor the ‘super-highway,’ do not realize the far-reaching results to the future,” said the pro-railroad Committee of Division Street School Teachers, one group who doubted car traffic could adequately replace known train revenues.⁴

The debate over reconstruction was treated with urgency in Key West and by their regional trade partners in Cuba.⁵ The “civic, business, fraternal, and political organizations” of Cuba favored a return of the railroad. Members of the Cuban governmental commission took time during their observance of El Grito de Yara, the 67-year-old celebration of the declaration of independence from Spanish rule, to commit to “doing all possible to have the railroad rebuilt.”⁶ Since the train line had been disabled by the storm, the FEC maintained service through the Keys to Cuba via car ferries. However, the poor financial standing of the FEC, “in receivership since 1931,” heightened by the devastation of the storm left Floridians in need of other options.⁷ Less than a month after the

3 “Banner Tourist Season for Key West Predicted - Housing Department of Local Administration Continues to Receive Calls for Places,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935..

4 “School Unit Favors Rebuilding Railroad,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935. sec. People’s Forum.

5 “Matter of Rebuilding Railroad Now Being Generally Discussed - Residents Waking Up to Fact That Some Route of Transportation Becomes Essential - Porter Heard in Address at Rotary Meet,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 10, 1935..

6 “Cuba to Join in Efforts to Have Railroad Rebuilt - Representatives Attending Celebration Here Much Interested in Restoring System,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 12, 1935.

7 “Bondholders to Act on Viaduct Rail Line,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 1936.

storm, one enthusiastic Key West resident remarked that if a super highway were built between Miami and Key West, "nothing could stop Key West's progress."⁸ Subsequent discussions with Florida Governor David Sholtz (1933-1937) confirmed that a continuous water pipeline to Key West was also under consideration, as part of the release of the FEC right of way.⁹ Some Key West residents favored the super highway plan, others a combined highway and train system, while many others, like the Committee of Division Street School Teachers, simply wished for the train service and its attendant tax revenues to return. On the same day that a Georgia newspaper editor arrived by steamship from Tampa¹⁰ to investigate the deaths of the veterans on behalf of the American Legion,¹¹ other community members called the railroad rebuild the "most important issue confronting community."¹² Others published resolutions supporting the "expenditure of the amount necessary," in light of the fact that Key West could not "grow and prosper without railroad facilities."¹³ The Miami Chamber of Commerce, led by former mayor, C.D. Leffler, penned a similar resolution calling the FEC railroad rebuilding "a necessary requirement to the economic and business life of Miami, the Florida Keys and Key West."¹⁴ The opinions and resolutions were moot. The rail line was abandoned by the FEC a year later.¹⁵ Train proponents lost the battle; the Overseas Highway project would make continuous overland car transportation possible from anywhere in the United States to its southernmost city, Key West.

The argument between train advocates and highway proponents was but one facet in the contest to modernize Florida in the wake of what became known as the Labor Day Hurricane. Many

8 "Great Optimism Shown By One Key West Citizen Advocating Construction Super Highway," *The Key West Citizen*, October 3, 1935.

9 "Railroad and Bridge Matters Discussed with Fletcher and Loftin in Recent Conference," *The Key West Citizen*, October 5, 1935..

10 "Main Witness During Hearing on Deaths of Veterans Says Many Could Have Been Saved," *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935..

11 "Quimby Melton Arrived Today on S.S. Cuba," *The Key West Citizen*, October 12, 1935.

12 "City Councilman Cabrera Favors Rebuilding of Railroad System," *The Key West Citizen*, October 12, 1935.

13 "Lodge Favors Railroad Line - Knights of Pythias Adopts Resolution Bearing on Subject," *The Key West Citizen*, October 12, 1935.

14 "Miami Chamber of Commerce Favors Rebuilding Railroad," *The Key West Citizen*, October 12, 1935.

15 The Associated Press, "Public Hearing on Abandonment of Railroad Set for September 18," *The Key West Citizen*, September 4, 1936.

pondered a more far-reaching future that included modernizing buildings for comfort and safety. On the same day in October 1935 that Floridians packed a new club in Key West, an editor for the *Key West Citizen*, “the only daily newspaper in Key West and Monroe County... in its current format since 1905,” lamented that despite the last 50 years’ “great advances in science and mechanics, if we could look into the future, it is probable that we would realize that our present knowledge and utilization of the forces of nature are only crude beginnings.”¹⁶ The paper’s four pages were crowded with ads for modern amenities such as asbestos-cement roof tiles – lovely to look at “in modern artistic colors” and so durable that they couldn’t “rust, rot or burn... lasting as stone...”; a hotel in a “steel fireproof building located in the heart of [Jacksonville],” comfortable to the individual with “tub and shower bath, radio, electric ceiling fan, slat door for summer ventilation, comfortable beds with mattresses of inner spring construction.” Personals mentioned daily trips by plane to Miami and Havana for business or to visit family. Ads for tonics to treat malaria and the common cold adjoined one for “Davis 100 Per Cent Pure Paint,” which dared the reader not to “be hoodwinked.”¹⁷ Absent from the papers was mention of the aftermath of the tragedy for Keys civilians. After the publication of the names of casualties in mid-September,¹⁸ there was little mention at all of the local victims or the destruction that they suffered in the local news coverage written between September and December of 1935.¹⁹ Deaths of the veterans were attributed to government ineptitude, individual error, and even “flimsy housing.”²⁰ Hearings were held by the federal government, responses were issued, and private organizations conducted their own investigations. Committees were formed. This topic has been explored by contemporary journalists and more recently in popular and academic publications.

While seemingly little attention was given to civilian recovery in the Upper Keys, projects were under way for the permanent residents of the Upper Keys that would bring unalterable change to the

16 “Not Yet Civilized,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935..

17 See *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935..

18 “Red Cross Compiles List of Civilian-Dead in Recent Storm,” *The Key West Citizen*, September 14, 1935.

19 For typical regional coverage, see daily paper *The Key West Citizen*, weekly paper *The Clewiston News*, and weekly paper *The Leader-Enterprise* September - December 1935.

20 Special to *The New York Times*, “Blames Flimsy Housing,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 1935.

islands' landscapes. The same storm that caused the replacement of the rail link to Key West with car transportation also brought concrete house construction to the Florida Keys. Keys homes in the early 20th century were largely wooden, either bungalow-style, or two stories with ventilating windows, dormers, and sometimes roof hatches at the second floor. Most looked like cracker houses, raised on piers with covered porches and sloped roofs. Larger houses commonly had outbuildings with cooking facilities and covered cisterns for water collection. The houses that replaced them were of a modern, cast-in-place concrete construction, and often referred to as bunkers or storm shelters. But these new concrete structures were homes, not bunkers. They were "a new type of American home... characterized by practical architectural styles" with an emphasis on safety.²¹ Called "WPA Houses," "Red Cross Houses," or "Hurricane Houses,"²² they replaced the timber houses and were, for a time, among the only buildings in the stretch of land between Long Key and Plantation Key.

The Hurricane Houses that brought change to the communities of what are now Islamorada and Tavernier were not preordained. Documents compiled and recently shared through a local archive²³ bring new attention to the debate that took place among the organizations involved in the storm relief and post-disaster rebuilding as to the character of the homes, the purpose of disaster relief, and by extension, their part in bringing a new kind of home building to Florida. This paper addresses the rebuilding efforts on behalf of the permanent residents and seeks to accomplish two purposes: to revisit newly compiled documents from the Upper Florida Keys rebuilding efforts and to contextualize these documents with records of participants and other post-disaster rebuilding projects.

Florida in the 1930s was an attraction to the elderly, those in poor health, and transients looking for work. They were drawn by the warm climate, advertised public works projects, and a perceived return to prosperity.²⁴ In addition to the retirees and job seekers,

21 *Designed for Concrete: 55 Selected Designs from the 1936 Pencil Points - Portland Cement Association Architectural Competition for the Design of Firesafe Concrete Homes* (New York, NY: Portland Cement Association, 1936).

22 Refer to Matthew G. Hyland, "The Florida Keys Hurricane House: Post-Disaster New Deal Housing," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2012): 212-247. See fn. 5, p. 216 for discussion of the use of the term "Hurricane House" to emphasize their origin story.

23 See the Jerry Wilkinson Research Library at the Florida Keys History and Discovery Center, Islamorada, FL.

24 "Director of State Bureau Gives Explanation of Relief Problems," *The Key West Citizen*, October 7, 1935.

Florida also attracted wealthy tourists, with the season of arrivals beginning in earnest sometime after the Thanksgiving holiday. When the Labor Day Hurricane struck, officials believed that more locals had left the Keys than visitors had arrived, a fortunate net reduction in the number of people exposed to the disaster.²⁵ Tragically, the veterans idling in camps at that time were little more than a week away from being removed from the project and their station in the Keys. Funds from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) had been fully spent and, if the work had resumed, "other workmen would have carried on the project." FERA itself was shutting down, having met its intended expiration date in 1935. Thirty-five hours before the storm struck, a weather bureau meteorologist warned Ray Sheldon, deputy in command at the veteran camps, "it looks pretty bad."²⁶

As reports emerged on the morning of September 3, it became clear that the veterans' camps and bungalow houses of Upper and Lower Matecumbe had failed as storm shelters. Remains of the dead left clues as to the types of exposures suffered during the storm after high winds and sea action drove individuals outside in search of safety. Reports detailed the way bodies were positioned after being caught in 15-foot waves, or their appearance after being blasted by sand blown at 100 miles per hour.²⁷ One man survived the storm but died two days later of injuries sustained by being pierced by a two-by-four.²⁸ Survivors described fleeing buildings, mid-storm, as rising waters drove them from their shelters. A mother and child were washed 30 miles from their home, only to crawl up on the beach and die of exposure.²⁹ The buildings themselves played a part in the night's terror. Claude Lowe, a Tavernier resident, described "fleeing a collapsing house, being knocked down by debris scores of times, clinging to a tree, and finally entering a floating house, which rode out the storm." All while carrying his four-month-old baby.³⁰ The Snake Creek Hotel, used as a hos-

25 DeWitt Smith, "Letter to Mr. James L. Feiser on Sep. 15; Subject: Florida Hurricane, Nature and Extent of Disaster," September 15, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

26 "Main Witness During Hearing on Deaths of Veterans," 1935.

27 John L. Teets, "Letter from John L. Teets to Colin Herrle Special Field Report Dates Covered: Sept. 3-20 '35 Subject: Florida Hurricane," September 20, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

28 "Rescue Yacht Takes Injured to Miami; Sixty Survivors Tell of Clinging to Water Tanks as Others Slipped into Sea," *The New York Times*, September 5, 1935.

29 Jeannette Gato and Dan Gallagher, eds., "The Rescue That Came Too Late," from *The Monroe County Environmental Story* (Big Pine Key, FL: Seacamp Association, Inc., 1991).

30 The Associated Press, "Saved by Swimming - Baby Goes Through Storm

pital, collapsed around 10pm. A doctor escaped through a hole in the wall into three or four feet of water while Joseph Factsau, local resident and timekeeper at veteran's Camp 5, heard the cries of his own wife, trapped in the collapse.³¹ Where the hurricane's eye crossed the island, between what is now Islamorada – including Upper and Lower Matecumbe – and Tavernier, buildings collapsed, floated away, or splintered and became flying debris. Flying reconnaissance after the storm, one marine captain noted, “on both Upper and Lower Matecumbe, the only evidence of structures which formerly stood on these Keys were the concrete foundations which in many instances were also uprooted.”³² The local conch families were devastated by the storm, losing their homes and possessions in addition to entire extended families.³³

A number of formal and informal inquiries attempted to answer the questions that were raised regarding the cause of the devastation. Aubrey Williams of FERA, assistant to Harry Hopkins, suggested that it was simply failure to heed all-too common warnings that had resulted in the high casualties, including hundreds of civilian deaths.³⁴ Community advocacy and the presence of experienced disaster relief team members at all levels of the response drove the responding agencies to consider better, more resilient shelters for residents. Speaking from experience, James L. Feiser, vice chairman of the Red Cross, explained in 1937 that “better home construction leaves more buildings intact after they meet up with floods, hurricanes, windstorms, and earthquakes.” Feiser felt, however that it was difficult to convey this simple fact to project participants, including builders.³⁵ Residents sheltering in overturned train cabins and cars had fared better than those who had remained indoors in some cases.

The post-disaster rebuilding of homes was seen by the Red Cross as more than an issue of material comfort. Homes were shelters that kept occupants safe, dry, and better able to fend off typhoid fever, pneumonia, and other post-disaster illnesses. Past disaster

Unharmred,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 1935.

31 The Associated Press, “Injured Recount Camp Gale Horror; Doctor Describes Razing of Hospital and All Other Buildings at Veteran’s Base,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 1935.

32 H.D. Boynton, “Report of Captain Boynton After Reconnaissance Flight to Key West - Captain H.D. Boynton, U.S. Marine Corps, Squadron V0-9” (Miami, FL: U.S. Marine Corps, September 5, 1935).

33 Gato and Gallagher, “The Rescue That Came Too Late.”

34 “Cremations Begun in Key Gale Area - Services with Military Honors Mark the Florida Effort to Prevent Pestilence,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 1935.

35 “Red Cross Views Big Flood in Films; DeWitt Smith, Chief in January Disaster Area, Tells of Six of Staff Who Gave Lives,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 1937.⁷

relief efforts had led the Red Cross to undertake home rebuilding projects. After a 1928 hurricane in Puerto Rico, relief workers described the protective nature of housing that provided “a direct relation to health.” The Puerto Rican rebuilding effort replaced “huts made of palm hatch” with pine plank walls and metal roofs that were “substantial and able to resist high winds.” Those relief workers hoped that their home rebuilding would inspire future rebuilding efforts with its “precedents and for methods.”³⁶ In the days after the Labor Day Hurricane, as search efforts were at their height and recovery needs were not yet known, Florida Governor Sholtz received an offer of aid from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. “Thanks for your telegram,” he wrote. “Have ordered State troops into afflicted area and have wired my personal representative on the ground to advise if any additional emergency work Federal Government can do and will call on you for additional assistance if necessary.”³⁷

Conversations related to aid necessitated consideration of building materials and housing types. Timber houses had a reputation as shoddy buildings made using “[faulty] bungalow construction” methods. Early reinforced concrete construction projects in the US were used as examples of modernization and technological progress. Mixed to designed proportions of cement, water, and aggregates, such as gravel and sand, reinforced concrete’s compressive strength was supplemented through the introduction of steel reinforcing bars called rebar, known to improve the tensile strength of concrete. Its durability in civil and building construction projects was well understood,³⁸ even among disaster relief organizations. In their 1935 pamphlet chapter “Storm-Proofing the Keys,” the American Red Cross reported “frame dwellings and the haphazard construction of earlier dwellings offered no resistance to strong winds...concrete was the solution.”³⁹ But as Keys

36 “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Florida” (Washington, D.C.: American National Red Cross, September 1928), 31.

37 “Federal Agencies Are Mobilizing Aid; Grayson Orders More Workers into Field as Red Cross Puts Dead at 200,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 1935.

38 Refer to coverage of reinforced concrete construction in “Scientific American” for examples of 19th and early 20th century projects including “Concrete Building,” *Scientific American* 21, no. 16 (October 1869); “An Artistic Reinforced Concrete Bridge,” *Scientific American* 102, no. 11 (1910): 216–216; “A Reinforced Concrete Hotel,” *Scientific American* 98, no. 7 (1908a): 109–110; and Robert G. Skerrett, “A Climax in Concrete Construction: Erecting An Eighteen Story Reinforced Concrete Building at a Lower Cost Than a Structural Steel Type,” *Scientific American*, December 1921.

39 “Hurricanes 1935” (American National Red Cross, 1935), Records of the American National Red Cross, 1881 - 2008, The National Archives.

historian, Jerry Wilkinson, has noted, residents at the time were suspicious of concrete homes, due to the crumbling tendency of the local examples made of shells and cement.⁴⁰ Resistance to concrete would also come from an unexpected direction: the policy of relief agencies to replace damaged structures with in-kind or similar materials.

Building with reinforced concrete entailed construction methods unlike those used for timber framed houses including different materials, equipment, and labor and management practices. Concrete required the import of materials such as cement, aggregate, and fresh water, but its installation was more mechanized and required fewer skilled carpenters to achieve, creating a greater distinction between laborers and foremen. The number of workers needed may have remained the same, but it was possible to employ workers of lower skill levels in productive work on concrete construction sites. Concrete was mixed in large drums or in mixers mounted to trucks and poured in large batches into forms shaped from pine timber. After the forms and rebar had been placed, much of the work of concrete construction lay in pushing the heavy mixture into place and vibrating it to remove air bubbles. Debate between labor leaders and others on the merits of technological progress in the face of its impact on workers was common and featured on the front page of the *Key West Citizen* in November of 1936, days after FDR's re-election. Quoting conservative economist Joseph Stagg Lawrence, the paper said it was the "general contention of such economists that technological progress may force men to change jobs, but that it always increases the total of jobs."⁴¹ Historian Amy Slaton has argued that the use of concrete entangled construction with mass production, creating a new process.⁴² Working with concrete in the Upper Keys involved using heavy and mechanized equipment to chip away oolitic limestone bedrock, haul materials by train and barge, and to mix and place using truck-mounted rigs. The change to work methods was particularly remarkable for Floridian residential construction, given its tendency towards one off, owner-built production. However, working with bulk materials and purchases reflected the

40 "Conchs Feel Safe in 'Red Cross' Homes," *The Herald*, October 10, 1999, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

41 "Economic Highlights - Happenings That Affect the Dinner Pails, Dividend Checks and Tax Bills of Every Individual; National and International Problems Inseparable From Local Welfare," *The Key West Citizen*, November 6, 1936..

42 Amy E. Slaton, *Reinforced Concrete and the Modernization of American Building, 1900-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

workflow required by the responding organizations based on the need to requisition materials in advance and ship them through a complicated progression of trains and barges. It also flattered local sensibilities. Florida was proud of its industries, from sea turtle harvest to the milling of Fuller's Earth, pine, and cypress, and the production of turpentine. "Few tourists know industrial Florida" was a humble brag promoted in the 1930s.⁴³ Industries provided work and income to Florida residents. Feeding materials to the major civil and public works projects planned and ongoing in Florida in the late 1930s would drive demand for new industries, which in turn provided new work and income.⁴⁴

By October 26th, 1935, less than eight weeks after the Labor Day Hurricane, blueprints were ready for 42 new single-family houses that would be built: 26 concrete and 16 timber framed.⁴⁵ The use of steel-reinforced, cast-in-place concrete for Hurricane Houses, the single-family houses built between 1935-1936, upended the labor force, oversight, and resources traditionally associated with timber house construction. Houses built employing new construction techniques would be unlike those of past post-disaster rebuilding efforts and would bring Keys residential construction practices closer in line with major civil building projects.

In October 1935, not two months after one of the most ferocious hurricanes in United States history, ground broke on a rebuilding effort for the home-owning conch families of the Upper Florida Keys. The Hurricane Houses were built in the aftermath of disaster, on a strong framework of preparedness. The precipitating event was a Category 5 hurricane with 200 mph winds and a 20-foot storm surge, but the collaboration was made possible by the years' long relationship developed between the United States government and the American Red Cross (ARC). Frequent partners in disaster relief in the 1920s and 1930s, the U.S. federal government and ARC shared information, resources, and management decisions in their efforts to relieve suffering in the aftermath of storms, floods, conflicts, and other disasters.⁴⁶ The working relationship

43 "Florida's Industries - Prepared by the National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C. - WNU Service," *The Clewiston News*, January 24, 1936.

44 "Cement Companies Plan New Plants in Ocala," *The Clewiston News*, September 20, 1935.

45 "Florida Hurricane Relief Operation: Report for the Period Ending October 26, 1935" (American Red Cross, October 26, 1935), Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

46 For examples of early 20th century cooperation between the ARC and US government refer to "25 Perish in Hurricane; Red Cross and Army Push Relief to

between the two, and the field organization of the ARC, made the rapid rehoming of civilian hurricane victims not just a possibility, but a priority beginning in September 1935.

FERA, one of the many New Deal alphabet agencies operating in Florida in the 1930s, represented the federal government in the rebuilding effort. While the nation reeled from the Great Depression, the New Deal policies of four term President Franklin D. Roosevelt benefited recovery efforts in Florida in the years prior to World War II, perhaps due to the lobbying of politicians like Florida Governor David Sholtz.⁴⁷ Governor Sholtz was a Brooklyn-born, Yale-educated friend to President Roosevelt, who had been stationed in Key West and Havana during World War I as an ensign in the United States Navy. His father built the first concrete bridge across the Halifax River in Daytona.⁴⁸ The New Deal agencies Sholtz courted included FERA and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), both of which managed projects while funding state and local organizations to distribute relief. By 1935, FERA was managing work relief projects in south Florida including new buildings and infrastructure projects such as a limestone building at Chapman Field military base and a pine-built community house at Biscayne Park.⁴⁹ When FDR came to Florida in 1935 ahead of Thanksgiving, Governor Sholtz, the Florida cabinet and Supreme Court justices, and 500 cars of enthusiastic Floridians participated in “the greatest motorcade ever organized in Florida” to greet the president and escort him from Atlanta.⁵⁰ FDR’s New Deal policies

Houma, La.,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 1926; “Red Cross Assumes Charge of Relief; Nation-Wide Appeal for Funds Is Likely to Succor Florida Victims. President Kept Informed Details of the Disaster Awaited Before Relief Campaign Is Started.,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 1926; “WPA Flood Army Toils in 14 States; 275,000 Workers Have Saved Thousands of Lives, Millions in Property, Hopkins Says. Red Cross Fund \$3,888,989 Meanwhile Congress Drive to Restore \$500,000,000 to the Control Bill Is Begun.,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 1936.

47 John A. Stuart, “Liberty Square: Florida’s First Public Housing Project,” in *The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community Building, 1933-1940*, ed. John A. Stuart and John F. Stack (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008).

48 Merlin G. Cox, “David Sholtz: New Deal Governor of Florida,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1964): 142–152.

49 John A. Stuart, “Constructing Identity: Building Place in New Deal South Florida,” in *The New Deal in South Florida: Design, Policy, and Community Building, 1933-1940*.

50 “Roosevelt’s Homecoming to Be Celebrated - Great Motorcade Headed by Governor Sholtz to Leave Tallahassee Friday for Atlanta,” *The Key West Citizen*, November 25, 1935.

enjoyed widespread approval among Florida residents⁵¹ and Governor Sholtz insisted that Florida was on its way to recovery in 1935.⁵²

FERA was a cash relief and job creation agency that granted aid to white and Black Americans. FDR signed into law the act creating FERA on May 12, 1933, shortly after his first inauguration. Between 1933 and 1935 FERA distributed \$3 billion (\$59.5 billion in 2021 dollars) in aid to states.⁵³ Because the Federal Emergency Relief Act of 1933 mandated that FERA should end two years after its inception, a new program was needed to take its place. The replacement agency was the WPA, which took over programs put in place by FERA that were not phased out. The WPA was created May 6, 1935, by authority of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. Some FERA administrators straddled roles during the transition to the WPA and continued on in similar positions, allowing for continuity in districts served. Both FERA and the WPA were headed by FDR's advisor, Harry Hopkins (1890-1946), among those most credited with New Deal relief efforts. Deeply involved at the management level, he oversaw FERA, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and the WPA and maintained involvement with FDR's administration through World War II. Hopkins was known for rolling up his sleeves for dramatic effect and was driven to find what he thought of as humane solutions "for fellow citizens who wanted work and could not get it."⁵⁴ He favored "work relief" to "the dole" but was willing to use either as tools to keep US families fed when they went hungry.⁵⁵ As head of FERA, Hopkins and other officials encouraged coordination of public disaster relief efforts with the ARC. There was some funding from the federal and local governments for such efforts. However, soliciting private contributions to the ARC was a major component of the relief strategy. After a September 1933 hurricane, Hopkins said, "Relief of over 24,000 families is going forward under a plan for use of

51 David Nelson, "A New Deal for Welfare: Governor Fred Cone and the Florida State Welfare Board," *Florida Historical Society* 84, no. 2 (2005): 185–204.

52 Merlin G. Cox, "David Sholtz."

53 The Living New Deal, "Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) (1933)," *Living New Deal* (blog), 2021.

54 "Text of Harry L. Hopkins's Address Before the National Conference of Mayors Nov. 17 as Printed in the New York Times," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1936.

55 R.L. Duffus, "The Largest Job in the Country; Spending to Save; The Complete Story of Relief; By Harry L. Hopkins. 197 Pp. New York: W.W. Norton & Co. \$1.50; Book Review," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1936, sec. *The New York Times* Book Review.

Federal funds to provide food and work relief and, with the Red Cross assuming the responsibility for rebuilding homes, providing furniture, clothing, and certain other necessities.” He emphasized the appeal, stating, “This rehabilitation part of Red Cross disaster relief is made possible through contributions from the public.”⁵⁶ Hopkins spoke regularly to crowds on topics of unemployment and funding economic relief efforts for out of work Americans. In 1934 Hopkins referred to a “war on social injustice and poverty,”⁵⁷ a war he felt necessary to combat the societal ill of unemployment of the employable. Advancing these goals produced co-benefits that he touted: “200,000 miles of road repaired; 7,000 bridges; 1,000 miles of new water mains,” and so on. He called the destitute “just as honest, no more so; just as lazy, no lazier, than the rest of us.”⁵⁸

FERA, including 600 veterans employed on work relief, was on the ground at the site of the hurricane in early September 1935, caring for the wounded veterans on their payroll who had survived the storm. Its infrastructure and personnel featured in the early decision making and administration of the relief work, including the post-disaster home rebuilding project. One ARC administrator supposed that FERA’s immediate presence probably resulted in “less [confusion] than most disasters, especially when the large number of deaths is taken into account.”⁵⁹

According to the *Clewiston News* the ARC response to the Labor Day Hurricane represented one of the “one hundred and sixty times in thirty-seven of the forty-eight states and three insular territories” when the organization provided relief from disaster in 1934-1935. Many of the ARC personnel had been involved in past hurricane relief efforts and were shifted regularly around the country and to nearby neighbors to respond to disasters. The ARC derived both service membership and funding from drives conducted during their annual “Roll Call period.” Roll Call in 1935 was expected to result in a membership of more than five million dues-paying members by the end of the year.⁶⁰ Their target pool included “all those who are in sympathy with the wide spread activities of the Red Cross and who are willing to contribute from

56 “Urges Hurricane Relief; Hopkins Asks Public to Back Red Cross in Florida and Texas,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 1933.

57 Harry L. Hopkins, “Text of Speech of Harry L. Hopkins on Relief Nov. 11 as Recorded in the New York Times,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1934.

58 R.L. Duffus, “The Largest Job,” 1936.

59 DeWitt Smith, “Letter to Mr. James L. Feiser on Sep. 15.”

60 “Red Cross Makes All-Time Record,” *The Clewiston News*, September 15, 1935.

five cents to fifty cents weekly,” the membership dues that financed “the work of another year.”⁶¹ By 1935 the United States government had a close working relationship with the ARC as an “independent entity,” a “nonprofit, tax-exempt, charitable institution pursuant to a charter granted to us by the United States Congress” that focused its mission on disaster relief.⁶² In September 1928, when a hurricane tore through Puerto Rico from the southwestern end and exited the northeastern end, “torrential rains and cloud bursts in the mountains swept away the small homes built in the narrow valleys near the river banks.” Within days, ARC Chairman, John Barton Payne, had conferred with President Herbert Hoover, who jointly appealed to national Red Cross chapters and the American people for contributions to the charity’s relief fund.⁶³ In March 1936, following substantial flooding across eleven states in the U.S., FDR issued the following proclamation

To enable the Red Cross to meet this immediate obligation and to continue to carry the burden of caring for these unfortunate men, women and children until their homes are restored and they can return to normal living conditions, it is necessary that a minimum relief fund of three million dollars be raised as promptly as possible. As President of the United States and as President of the American Red Cross, I am, therefore, urging our people to contribute promptly and most generously so that sufficient funds may be available for the relief of these thousands of our homeless fellow citizens.⁶⁴

The ARC received much of their funding for operations from donations from the public directly stemming from disasters. National media covered the fundraising pledge drives in newspapers in the aftermath of storms and other disasters. An ARC Field Representative gave careful consideration to how media coverage could impact fundraising and therefore mission delivery outcomes, warning representatives that “the press is with us, generally, except

61 “Annual Membership Drive Will Begin Here Monday,” *The Key West Citizen*, November 9, 1935.

62 The American Red Cross, “Our Federal Charter,” accessed July 9, 2021.

63 “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Florida” (Washington, D.C.: American National Red Cross, September 1928).

64 Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Proclamation 2161—Contributions to the American Red Cross for Relief in the Flood Areas,” The American Presidency Project at UC Santa Barbara, March 19, 1936.

the red-neck papers. They are against everything.”⁶⁵ The ARC also relied heavily on charismatic private citizens for donations to cover relief efforts. Will Rogers was credited with spurring several hundred thousand dollars in donations through performances, visits, and personal check writing in just under two decades beginning in 1919; disasters receiving his attention included a mine explosion in Oklahoma, drought in the Midwest, and an earthquake in Nicaragua.⁶⁶ Because of their reliance on donors to meet program goals, the ARC feared publicity that would dampen their funding drives. In 1926 when Governor John W. Martin (in office 1925-1929) was accused of depressing fundraising efforts due to a statement that conditions in hurricane-damaged Miami “were much better than I expected to find them,”⁶⁷ the controversy made national news for a week and culminated in an assertion from Martin that the aid was welcome but that Florida would be ready for winter tourists and that “Florida needs no aid for reconstruction work.”⁶⁸ Later it was reported from the ARC that statements minimizing need “confused the public mind.”⁶⁹ Competing for attention among potential donors may always worry the non-profit sector, but during the Depression, it became a critical issue. In 1934, Harry Hopkins made a national appeal, reminding donors that unemployment relief need not overshadow disaster relief.⁷⁰

When a disaster occurred, the ARC dispatched ranking members to the scene. ARC relief projects began with a survey of census and damages and proceeded methodically. After the Great Sea Storm of 1893, thought to have killed between 1,500 and 5,000

65 John L. Teets, “Letter from John L. Teets, American Red Cross Field Representative, from the Misc. Red Cross Files of the Jerry Wilkinson Research Library,” September 24, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

66 The Associated Press, “Red Cross Cites Record of Rogers; Nine Years of His Good Deeds Will Be Compiled in Honor Roll of Organization.,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1935.

67 “Charge Gov. Martin Block Florida Aid; Accusations Are Made at Miami Secret Meeting That He Said No More Money Was Needed. Red Cross Heads Alarmed Sharp Drop in Donations Is Laid to Governor’s Statement – Need of Homeless Thousands Stressed.,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 1926.

68 “Florida Aid Fuss Put Up to Coolidge; National Committeeman Bean Confers at White House on Payne-Martin Dispute. DECLARES NEED IS URGENT Says Governor Contends Only That State Does Not Want Reconstruction Help.,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 1926.

69 “Reports Floridians Admit Need of Aid; Red Cross Vice Chairman Says Officials See Now Outside Help Is Necessary. LOCAL PRIDE IS BLAMED Statements Minimizing Loss for Hurricane Laid to It – These Confused the Public Mind.,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 1926.

70 “Hopkins Urges Gifts to Red Cross in Drive; He Says Unemployment Relief Must-Not Overshadow Need for Aid in Disasters; Address from Nov. 10,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1934.

people in the sea islands off Beaufort, South Carolina, Clara Barton, founder of the ARC, took just over a month to assess the field of damages before taking control of relief efforts. Shovels were immediately ordered by the ARC and distributed on loan to men in Beaufort. "Those were put into the hands of men who would otherwise have stood around with the hope of drawing something for nothing; it was to put them to work to clear up the roads, to make them feel that they were earning instead of being made beggars."⁷¹ In that case, the relief recipients were at special risk of retaliation and the ARC was particularly vulnerable to criticism for providing aid to the autonomous, landowning Black sea islanders. The threat of white supremacist retaliation made the appearance of a quid pro quo exchange of labor for relief doubly important.⁷² As materials were received, they were inventoried and distributed through a central warehouse, directed by a single executive. Red Cross relief efforts were managed through a chain of command overseen and coordinated by a director of relief, with area directors reporting to that director, with local supervisors and foreman reporting to the area director.⁷³ In 1935 Rear Admiral Cary T. Grayson (1878 - 1938) was at the top of that chain of management for the ARC. A former surgeon in the US Navy and White House Physician to Presidents Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson, Grayson was Chairman of the ARC from 1935 until his death. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, Grayson oversaw the roll out of local offices in Florida. Based in Miami, he was about 80 miles by land from the victims. Early surveyors reported damages from the Upper Keys. "At least 150 homes were completely destroyed and probably 250 damaged."⁷⁴

Soon after the Labor Day Hurricane, ARC officials initiated a plan for rebuilding, while FERA negotiated participation, ultimately contributing funding and some oversight. Projects were overseen by authorities from different funding agencies, whose territories were political as well as geographic. FERA and Red Cross divisions did not correspond exactly. While FERA administrators

71 "Testimony of Dr. E. Winfield Egan, June 2, 1895 from the Clara Barton Papers: Red Cross File, 1863-1957; American National Red Cross, 1878-1957; Relief Operations; Sea Islands, S.C.; Speeches and Writings, 1893-1895, Undated" (1895).

72 Caroline Grego, "Black Autonomy, Red Cross Recovery, and White Backlash after the Great Sea Island Storm of 1893," *The Journal of Southern History* 85, no. 4 (2019): 803-840.

73 "The West Indies Hurricane Disaster," 1928.

74 DeWitt Smith, "Letter to Mr. James L. Feiser on Sep. 15; Subject: Florida Hurricane, Nature and Extent of Disaster," September 15, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

were centrally dispatched, Red Cross workers usually centered in a single community, often for a single event and “many Red Cross workers served voluntarily and without pay.”⁷⁵ Not unique to ARC, FERA responders would also have been familiar with the numbers and types of casualties associated with previous Florida hurricanes. Some of the officials were involved with the response to the 1928 Belle Glade hurricane and may have worked alongside the coffins piled in trucks, by the sides of the road, stacked five high.⁷⁶

Despite the familiarity of the public and private relief organizations on the scene with the terrain, the frequency of hurricanes, and the need for stronger, more resilient buildings, there was no early consensus on how to proceed with the rebuilding effort. George Myer was the Red Cross Director of Disaster Relief for the Labor Day Hurricane. A former accountant for Red Cross, Myer was an example of leadership promoted from within the organization. Myer participated in responses to floods, hurricanes, and other disasters beginning in at least 1927.⁷⁷ He was sent directly to Jacksonville and then on to Miami within two days of the storm.⁷⁸ By the end of September, there were signs of confusion regarding how to proceed. The buildings that were destroyed had been almost entirely timber framed. Typical reconstruction procedure focused on replacing buildings in-kind, with similar sizes and materials. However, pressure was beginning to mount for an improvement in the type of construction used in this rebuilding effort. Myer was part of a group researching concrete building and suppliers. One ARC representative posed a problem to Myer and offered a possible solution: was it possible to “differentiate among beneficiaries in the Florida Keys, erecting concrete houses in some instances and frame houses in others,” noting that this might be “either because of the preferences of the beneficiaries themselves or because the type of house occupied by the beneficiary before the storm was in some instances of such a nature that we could not justify replacing it by a house of concrete construction.” Even in those situations

75 “Vinson Joins Borah in Relief Charges; Georgia Representative Says Work Is Directed by a ‘Bunch of School Children.’ Urges an Investigation Green Protests Hopkins Order Changing Minimum Hourly Pay on Federal Projects,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 1934.

76 For images of the Belle Glade hurricane aftermath, refer to the Florida Memory archive at “Historic Hurricane Photos - Selected Images from 1896 through 2005 - from Florida Memory, the State Library and Archives of Florida,” Florida Memory, 1928.

77 Special to *The New York Times*, “Red Cross Assists 5,700 in Flood Zone,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 1927.

78 Special to *The New York Times*, “Red Cross Plans Relief. Florida Chapter Ordered Ready for Disaster and Storm Aid,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 1935.

where it seemed justified, he worried that building concrete relief houses would “establish an embarrassing precedent that could not be followed in other parts of the affected territory in Florida.”⁷⁹ As part of the record of this conversation, a letter from Myer to Smith states that taking into account the end users’ wishes would mean acknowledging that “Keys residents are inclined to favor frame construction.”⁸⁰ This assessment was a correct read on the local building style, but Myer did not give up pursuing concrete as the preferred material. He began canvassing the Cement Companies of America for contributions while the material selection was still under discussion.⁸¹ The Hurricane Houses would provide relief to almost 30 households in the upper Florida Keys.

The relief efforts offered material aid but also peace of mind after the terror of the Labor Day Hurricane. However, this relief was meant for those who had lost their homes; at best, it was meant to return residents to their previous conditions without any meaningful quality of life improvements. The possibility of extending stretched resources beyond this narrow scope of basic replacement was met with disapproval. Administrators felt conflicted. The need to appeal confidently to contributors to the disaster relief fund made them cautious about making a decision that might be “misunderstood” as improving “the standards of families suffering in disaster.” Yet they wanted to convey the “attempt to bring about some improvement in building against actual disaster hazards,” an angle they were “confident” that “contributors to the disaster relief fund would generally approve.”⁸² The difference between building *more resilient* homes and building *nicer* homes was nuanced, and the correspondence discussing this topic conveyed the fears of an organization loathe to alienate its donors. The houses were meant to be modest, practical, and identical in appearance. They would be a single story tall and modular, with length varying based on the number of bedrooms. Drawings were commissioned from a professional engineer in September of 1935, but the question still remained: should they be framed from timber or concrete?

79 American Red Cross Representative, “Letter to Mr. Myer Regarding Relative Costs of House Types, from the Misc. Red Cross Files of the Jerry Wilkinson Research Library,” September 30, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

80 George E. Myer, “Letter, George E. Myer to DeWitt Smith Re: Framing Materials,” September 30, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

81 George E. Myer, “Letter, George E. Myer to Colin Herrle Re: Authorization of Construction Work,” September 24, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

82 DeWitt Smith, “Letter, DeWitt Smith to George E. Myer,” September 24, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

The Red Cross had some precedent for post-disaster rebuilding that improved the resilience of private homes. In their 1928 response to the hurricane in Puerto Rico, the ARC had been faced with disaster victims, farm workers previously granted permission to build homes on land that they did not own. The ARC sought whether “the applicant for relief owned the house that was destroyed, without taking into consideration the ownership of the site.” There they replaced the destroyed homes made of neat palm thatch with new ones made of pine plank walls, corrugated galvanized metal roofing, for a structure they rated as “substantial and able to resist high winds.” However, those who were homeless or refugees before the storm were furnished only with a canvas tent and a sum of money to use for relocation.⁸³ By October 1935, the FERA and ARC rebuilding team would have their answer; ground would break on the first houses. While declining to use the rebuilding effort to improve the standard of living of residents, an “improvement in the type of construction” was acceptable to ARC officials.⁸⁴

DeWitt Smith, the Assistant Director of Domestic Operations for the Red Cross, was among those stationed in the Miami office after the Labor Day Hurricane. Smith was partly responsible for creating a plan for the “relief and rehabilitation measures” carried out by the Red Cross in Puerto Rico and Florida following 1928 hurricanes. Ordered by Grayson to Miami on or about September 5, Smith was among the first in the local bureau established there to respond to the Labor Day Hurricane.⁸⁵ On September 24, Smith telegraphed the notice to proceed on the Hurricane House construction program.⁸⁶ Over the next month teams on the ground formalized plans, purchased materials, and acquired labor. By the week of October 26, six new homes had been started and one completed according to Red Cross reports. These were likely to have been timber framed structures. Additionally, ten homes were undergoing repairs down to the foundation. Plans were completed in the field during conferences held by the team identified as “Mr. Turner, Mr. Green,⁸⁷ Mr. Wilson, and Mr. Pringle.” Planning was deemed satisfactory, and it

83 “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster: Official Report of Relief Work in Porto Rico,” 1928.

84 Hyland, “The Florida Keys Hurricane House: Post-Disaster New Deal Housing,”

85 Special to *The New York Times*, “Defends Failure to Move Veterans; Hopkins Says Action Was Not Warranted by the Reports of Hurricane’s Course,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 1935.

86 George E. Myer, “Letter to Colin Herrle,” September 24, 1935.

87 This probably refers to “Commander Green who is in charge of F.E.R.A. work in the Keys” as referenced in other correspondence: George E. Myer, “Letter, George E. Myer to Colin Herrle Re: Authorization of Construction Work,” September 24, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

was expected that construction would begin next on the concrete houses the following week.⁸⁸ A local *Homestead*, Florida newspaper published a rare notice of the start of the home rebuilding project. Just below a notice that FERA had gone out of existence on that day, a brief report on the rebuilding effort for the \$400,000 road reconstruction leading to the Lower Matecumbe ended with a description of 40 reinforced concrete structures at intervals from Tavernier to Lower Matecumbe, "each shelter...a complete safety unit." The homes were described in a way that more closely resembled a disaster shelter than a home but confirmed that construction had begun there by November 11.⁸⁹

Funding was a problem early in the project. In a letter to George Myer, Smith wrote that because of "the failure of the appeal for funds in Florida to yield any significant return the National Organization is faced with the necessity of allotting from its own funds the amount necessary to complete the task on a minimum basis consistent with Red Cross standards."⁹⁰ Inter-agency disputes led to confusion over material purchasing. FERA originally took responsibility only for relief efforts for the "Veterans who were engaged in W.P.A. projects on the Florida Keys" and not at all for the "reconstruction of private homes."⁹¹ But a week later they had committed to providing skilled labor "for any reconstruction work undertaken by the Red Cross."⁹² By September 24, 1935, a more formal agreement had been achieved and FERA leadership had committed to supplying \$75,000 in labor forces from their relief rolls, believed to be the total amount needed to "complete the entire rehabilitation program to be undertaken by the Red Cross." In turn, FERA expected that the ARC would be supplying "all materials, equipment, supervisions and any labor necessary which could not be secured from relief rolls."⁹³ The ARC was still guarded about the support they expected to receive, writing, "We must, of course,

88 "Florida Hurricane Relief Operation: Report for the Period Ending October 26, 1935" (American Red Cross, October 26, 1935), Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

89 "\$400,000 Given for Rebuilding Road to Ferry - Construction of 40 Storm Shelters Started on Keys Tuesday," *The Leader-Enterprise*, November 15, 1935.

90 DeWitt Smith, "Letter, DeWitt Smith to George E. Myer," September 24, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

91 George E. Myer, "Letter from George E. Myer, Director to Red Cross Representatives Subject: Relations Between the American Red Cross & the F.E.R.A.," September 11, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

92 George E. Myer, "Letter, George E. Myer to Red Cross Re: FERA Labor," September 19, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

93 George E. Myer, "Letter, George E. Myer to Red Cross Re: FERA Labor," September 30, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

safeguard ourselves against the possibility of a change in the government's plans," referencing recent disasters where similar confusion had resulted in the Red Cross assuming "a larger part of the cost."⁹⁴ ARC correspondence reflects Red Cross concern regarding fundraising for the 1935 hurricane relief efforts after news coverage of federal emergency relief depressed local donations.⁹⁵ A year before, Hopkins had praised the efforts of private organizations noting that large amounts of public spending sometimes gave the impression that all relief needs were met by public agencies, an impression he called "unfortunate, for those of us close to the situation know only too well."⁹⁶ One drive resulted in the purpose-formed United Jewish Drive attempting to raise funds from every Jewish merchant and professional in the Miami area.⁹⁷ But as agreed, labor and supervision of the Hurricane Houses would be jointly overseen by the ARC and FERA, requiring significant recruitment that bore strong resemblance to that of other Florida public construction projects.

Labor management became a problem for the sites. ARC supervisors wished to hire skilled labor supervisors to supplement the unskilled FERA/WPA labor force often composed of unemployed typists, accountants, and other office staff on sites. Helen M. Colwell, another experienced Red Cross employee, conspired with Charles Wadsworth, the FERA/WPA Work Supervisor, to have the ARC direct hire "ten skilled or as nearly skilled as we can get for carpentry and masonry work" workers to supplement and supervise the FERA labor force.⁹⁸ Colwell had among her previous responsibilities response to Florida hurricanes in 1928 and 1933, and New Jersey fires in 1930. As Area Director for the Labor Day Hurricane efforts, Colwell was on site and interacted with construction field supervision on matters of workforce and scheduling. Her project management responsibilities included coordination with FERA and Red Cross on funding matters. As rebuilding and repair projects lagged in mid-October, Colwell anticipated delays to the upcoming reinforced concrete work if requested changes were not made. However, once the request went up the chain of command, it was

94 DeWitt Smith, "Letter, DeWitt Smith to George E. Myer," September 24, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

95 John L. Teets, "Letter from John L. Teets to Colin Herrle," 1935.

96 Harry L. Hopkins, "Text of Speech of Harry L. Hopkins on Relief," 1934

97 "Local Jewry Aids Red Cross," *The Jewish Floridian*, September 13, 1935.

98 Helen M. Colwell, "Letter, Helen M. Colwell to Mr. George Myer Re: F.E.R.A. Labor," October 19, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

perceived as admission of fault on the part of the field supervisor and the request was rescinded. The ARC team referenced restrictions on hiring of “any labor not relief clients” and the matter was dropped.⁹⁹ Public construction projects were sometimes exempted from quotas requiring workers come from relief rolls, “the dole,” due to the “shortage of skilled construction workmen on relief.”¹⁰⁰ According to the district WPA director, M.E. Gilfond, WPA workers laboring on FERA projects in the Keys typically received “\$12, food and shelter,” an arrangement considered “greatly in excess of the pay for other workers in Key West.” Workers from Key West were furnished transportation north to No Name Key, where they arranged and paid for their own onward transportation to the relief projects.¹⁰¹ Locally, tensions flared between workers and WPA administrators. A brief strike and demonstration of 200 workers on WPA projects was settled peaceably after Gilfond agreed to the concession of ice chips on sites. Gilfond stated ominously, “There are 1400 men in Key West who still do not have work;” replacements would be easy to come by. The striking labor committee was comprised of “three Americans, three Cubans and three Negroes” as reported in the *Key West Citizen*.¹⁰²

Ground was broken on the first house not two months after the Labor Day Hurricane struck. Speed of response may in part be attributed to some of the “preparedness measures” instituted by the Red Cross in the wake of the September 18, 1926 hurricane, after which a series of chapters and sub-committees were made ready for future storms in order to become “an ever present vital element in community life...capable of organizing local resources so as to function effectively in the face of an overwhelming disaster.”¹⁰³ The chapter organization was part of the strategy, but in order to achieve “the individual rehabilitation of families based on a thorough study of their needs,”¹⁰⁴ materials and labor were needed for

99 Helen M. Colwell, “Letter, Helen M. Colwell to Mr. Myer,” October 21, 1935, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

100 Edward W. Pickard, “News Review of Current Events the World Over - Administrator Harry L. Hopkins Issued an Order,” *The Clewiston News*, September 22, 1935.

101 “Gilfond Explains Status of Wage Scale in WPA Program,” *The Key West Citizen*, November 5, 1935.

102 “WPA Laborers Settle Trouble Started Today - Decision Made to Return to Work Tomorrow After Conference at Local Headquarters,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 15, 1935..

103 “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 1928

104 “The West Indies Hurricane Disaster,” 1928

the construction. Part of the organization lay in acquiring supplies. Access to the centralized resources of FERA and the Red Cross, with allowance for relatively flexible on the ground decision making benefitted the project. Local news coverage and social reporting provided many details on the construction supply chain in the Keys in the 1920s and 1930s, where daily reporting plainly covered topics such as the arrivals and departures of boats and out of town guests on newspaper front pages. Key West contained large shipping yards and materials for bridge construction projects could be obtained there when the supply chain was unbroken.¹⁰⁵ Heavy machinery required for the work was transported by barge. A “powerful ditching machine” expected to help dig streets for a sewer project in Key West was loaded to a barge and transported by the Over-Sea Highway Ferry *Key West*, accompanied by a supervising sanitary engineer.¹⁰⁶ Water, too, was brought by barge in train cars. When preparations were needed for a new ferry service in Port Everglades, a massive ferry carried railroad cars, FEC water cars, and “the 90-ton ferry apron [that was to be] installed by engineers and craftsmen of the railroad” from the yards at Key West.¹⁰⁷

Complicating rebuilding efforts were the widespread damages caused by the Labor Day Hurricane. Lacking train and highway transportation, and with significant damage to ferry slips, reconstruction efforts and even planning efforts were hampered. The mid-October damage survey trip undertaken by Colonel George E. Brown, U.S. Army Corps engineer in charge of the district and headquartered in Miami, illustrated the problems. He arrived in Key West by plane from Miami, stayed overnight before departing by car to No Name Key, then by ferry to Islamorada. He then returned to Miami using a waiting car. Despite the logistical problems, the two-day trip generated a report on the damages to the railroad properties in the Keys “including estimates of costs,” which was forwarded to his superiors in Washington, D.C. There was no mention of a survey of civilian properties.¹⁰⁸ In October 1935, the WPA and county authorities were in negotiations over the rebuilding of highway ferry slips at Mate-

105 “Key West in Days Gone By - Happenings Here Just 10 Years Ago Today as Taken from the Files of the Citizen,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935..

106 “Ferry Leaves for Matecumbe - Vessel to Bring Ditching Machine Here for Sewerage Work,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 9, 1935.

107 “Ferry Estrada Palma Leaves - Vessel Takes Equipment to Port Everglades, Florida,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 15, 1935.

108 “Colonel Brown Makes Survey of Damage to Railway Property to Be Forwarded to Headquarters,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 12, 1935.

cumbe. A \$12,000 contribution from county commissioners was required to enable WPA to manage the project.¹⁰⁹ Trains were cut off and rolling stock stranded, including one car carrying the Nautilus specimen tank from the Shedd Aquarium of Chicago. The route for the removal of the stranded cars went through the north apron of the north ferry slip in Key West where the vessel proceeded to Port Everglades.¹¹⁰ Ferry service between Snake Creek, the channel between Windley Key and Tavernier at about Mile Marker 85, and No Name Key, just east of Big Pine Key, was meant to be restored on November 1, 1935 in a temporary arrangement made while highway repairs were conducted at Lower Matecumbe Key.¹¹¹ However, swift moving winter water and dry spells proved the location too unreliable and a location at the lower end of Upper Matecumbe was selected.¹¹²

This work was carried out through negotiations between Conrad Van Hyning of the Florida ERA (FLERA) and Gilfond. Gilfond had been among the first to survey the casualties and destruction after the storm, wiring his hopes that those at Washington headquarters would “notice the extreme importance of bridges connecting mainland with Key West.”¹¹³ Conrad Van Hyning, the Administrator for the FL ERA, coordinated state relief efforts and participated in some decisions. He oversaw some operations from the site as well as business and administrative matters related to the scope of projects undertaken and the sources of funding. Among his responsibilities was oversight of the cremation and burials of Labor Day Hurricane victims. Another rehabilitation project at Snake Creek began in late October, conducted by “about 100 colored men of Key West.” The men were trucked daily from Key West to No Name Key in FERA trucks by volunteer drivers; county commissioners made their arrangements “since the Florida ERA ha[d] no funds for the work.”¹¹⁴ Low on funds, the FLERA offered free okra to community

109 “WPA Offers to Help Rebuild Ferry Slips - Letter Read From F.E. Albert, Supervisor of Finance, Dealing with Subject,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 3, 1935.

110 “Start Moving Rolling Stock - To Be Loaded on Ferry and Taken to Port Everglades,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 7, 1935..

111 “Ferry Service Between Snake Creek and No Name Key Will Begin on First of November,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 8, 1935.

112 “Ferry Slip at Matecumbe to Be Ready Soon - Work Carried on at This Point Instead of Snake Creek Project Which Has Been Abandoned,” *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935.

113 M.E. Gilfond, “Wire Transmission From M.E. Gilfond to Govt WPA Mr. Julius F Stone Jr. Field Representative - Naval Message Received at Navy Department” (Key West, FL, September 5, 1935), Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

114 “Colored Men to Work on Snake Creek Project,” *The Key West Citizen*, October

members willing to work for free as harvesters on the FERA experimental farm.¹¹⁵ Once the water gaps were closed and ferry services repaired, bus services operated by Florida Motor Lines resumed operation from Homestead to Key West in January 1936.¹¹⁶

"We have never," said Hopkins in 1936, "given adequate relief."¹¹⁷ Despite this assertion, on March 9, 1936, ARC officials reported that the 29 concrete homes "underway" would be completed around June 1, 1936,¹¹⁸ about nine months after the storm struck as a joint effort with the defunct FERA agency. On 13 July 1936 ARC officials reported that four added timber framed building and repair projects would close out the hurricane repair cases, including residences and two businesses.¹¹⁹ The 29 Hurricane Houses were built with a single story above a raised, cast-in-place foundation tied to the islands' coral rock. They featured a sloped roof, half porch, and jalousie windows.

Reconstruction efforts in the Upper Keys did not end with the Hurricane Houses. WPA engineer Moore was in charge of at least some of the later projects in the Keys including school buildings in Tavernier and Islamorada, WPA-funded buildings meant to serve also as storm shelters in the event of future hurricanes.¹²⁰ The concrete Overseas Highway extension from Miami to Key West was reported to cost \$3.6M, generate 1,200 jobs divided among "highly skilled artisans, semi-skilled and unskilled laborers."¹²¹ It was "a particularly sturdy type of construction is compulsory" composed of "the highest quality products." The new "super-highway" was expected to be durable and low maintenance. The *Key West Citizen* carried in full a magazine article touting its supposed advan-

14, 1935..

115 "Relief Clients Made Offer on Farm Products - All Assisting in Harvesting Vegetables Will Be Permitted to Receive Certain Portion," *The Key West Citizen*, October 14, 1935..

116 "Key West Bus Service to Start in Few Days," *The Leader-Enterprise*, September 15, 1935..

117 R.L. Duffus, "The Largest Job in the Country," 1936

118 Roy Wingate, "Letter, Roy Wingate to Mr. Bondy Re: Keys Building Program Material and Labor Progress," March 9, 1936, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

119 Robert E. Bondy, "Letter, Robert E. Bondy to Mr. Herrle Re: Logistics for Four Remaining Repair Projects," July 13, 1936, Jerry Wilkinson Research Library.

120 "Plan Buildings in Key Section - Roy Goodman Leaves This Morning on Trip," *The Key West Citizen*, September 2, 1936.

121 "Magazine Article Describes Outstanding Advantages of Proposed Overseas Highway - Shows Opportunity That Will Be Afforded Travelers Headed in This Direction," *The Key West Citizen*, November 3, 1936.

tages: "Engineers are figuring upon a method of construction that will eliminate repairs for at least 30 years and special attention is being paid to building the highway and the bridge supports so that hurricane tides will not undermine them."¹²² ARC workers soon continued their efforts in other projects. In March 1936 Helen Colwell was assigned to Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in response to spring floods across 44 states; George Myer went to Concord, New Hampshire.¹²³ In 1937, Myer was reported to be the Assistant Director of Red Cross Disaster Relief, tasked with sheltering 3,700 Tennesseans made homeless by flooding.¹²⁴ DeWitt Smith continued to rise through the organization and in 1941 was quoted on the finances of the ARC as they considered greater collaboration with the U.S. Armed Forces.¹²⁵ Other participants continued their lives in the public eye. M.E. Gilford and his wife were relocated to Washington, D.C. to accept his elevation to the Rural Resettlement Administration in early 1936.¹²⁶ Admiral Grayson succumbed to anemia in 1938 at age 59.¹²⁷ Harry Hopkins, ill since 1938, died in 1946 at age 55, just nine months after the death of President Roosevelt.¹²⁸

This article draws from contemporary historic sources to examine the decision-making processes of the key groups and personalities behind the building effort. Absent evidence of coherent top-down design directives, these houses appear to have been a

122 "Magazine Article Describes Overseas Highway," 1936.

123 Special to *The New York Times*, "\$18,411,633 Ready for WPA Flood Aid; \$2,000,000 Made Available by the President for New York State, \$1,250,000 for Jersey," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1936.

124 The Associated Press, "Louisville Flood Stops All Traffic - With Large Sections of City Under Water, Street Cars and Buses Are Halted - Flood Level If the Highest Ever - Thousands Are Homeless in Tennessee," *The New York Times*, January 23, 1937.

125 Special to *The New York Times*, "Red Cross Accepts Big Expansion Task; Delegates Told Membership Rise by 50%, With Fund Increases Required ARMY, NAVY HAIL SERVICE Volunteer Services Vote to Take Only Citizens for Ambulance and Canteen Duties," *The New York Times*, April 24, 1941.

126 "Gilfond Receives Transfer to Position in Washington, D.C.," *Key West Citizen*, January 3, 1936, George A. Smathers Libraries.

127 The Associated Press, "Admiral Grayson Dies in Capital; Head of American Red Cross Personal Physician to Taft, T. Roosevelt and Wilson WAS A VICTIM OF ANEMIA Defender of Wilson After the Latter's Stroke—A Breeder of Noted Race Horses His Devotion to Wilson Factor In Presidency Control ADMIRAL GRAYSON DIES IN CAPITAL Heads American Red Cross Prescriptions for Presidents A Feat in Riding," *The New York Times*, February 15, 1938.

128 "Hopkins, 55, Dies in Hospital Here; Nature of Illness Obscure— Held Important Posts in 12 Years as Roosevelt Aide," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1946.

true collaboration between multiple interests. While primarily seen at that time in industrial and civil building projects, reinforced concrete construction was made available in Islamorada because of the available technology, labor force, and institutional resources brought to bear in the hurricane rebuilding efforts. It was due to these factors that the project planners were able to primarily use reinforced concrete in lieu of timber framed construction despite the higher cost and concerns surrounding using disaster relief aid to materially improve the lives of its recipients. Regarding the Hurricane Houses, Red Cross officials predicted that “the types being built do provide reasonable assurance that the loss of lives will not be so great in the future.”¹²⁹ Any future best efforts to expand the recognition of these houses beyond their limited inclusion in the Florida Keys Heritage Trail would mention the participants involved and the way that their efforts contributed to the modernization of home building practices.

129 “Hurricanes 1935” (American National Red Cross, 1935), Records of the American National Red Cross, 1881 - 2008, The National Archives.