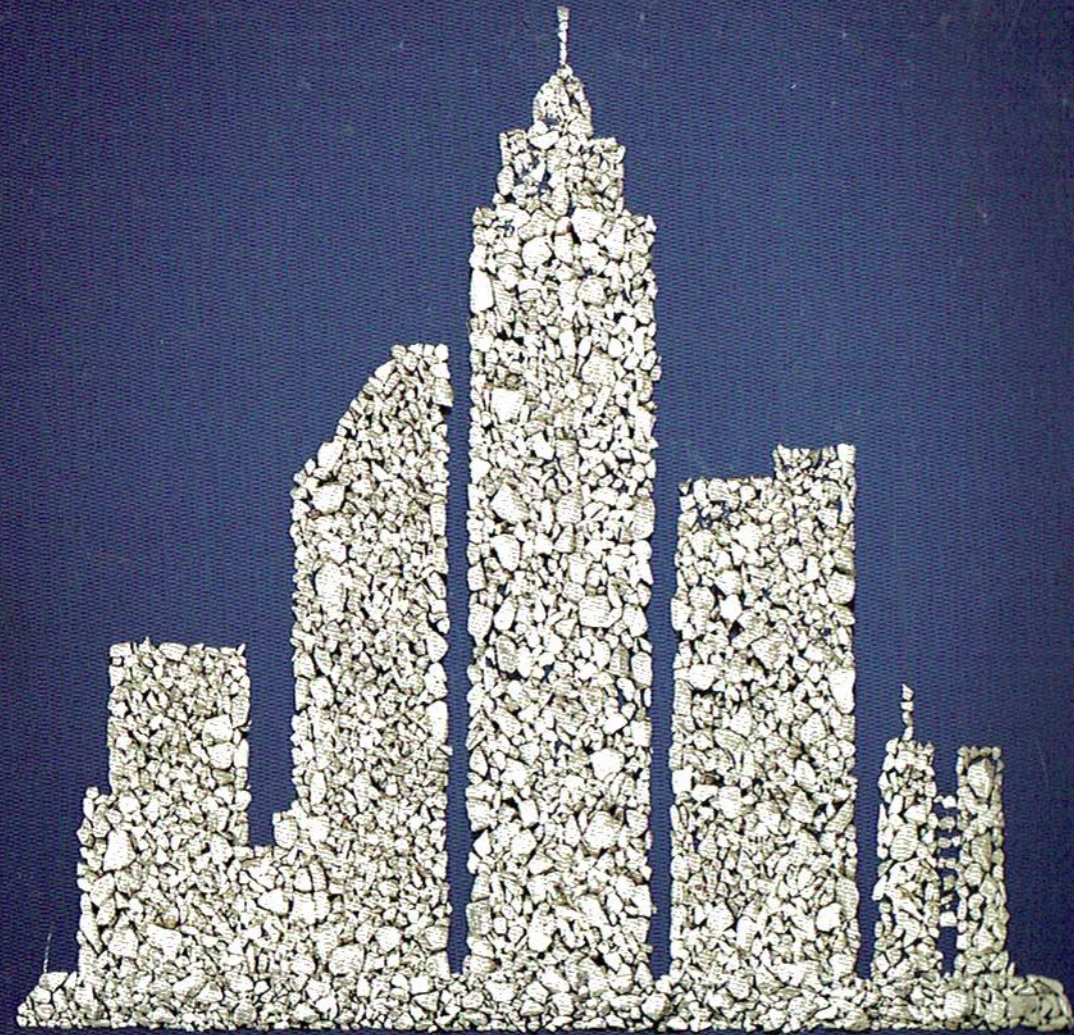
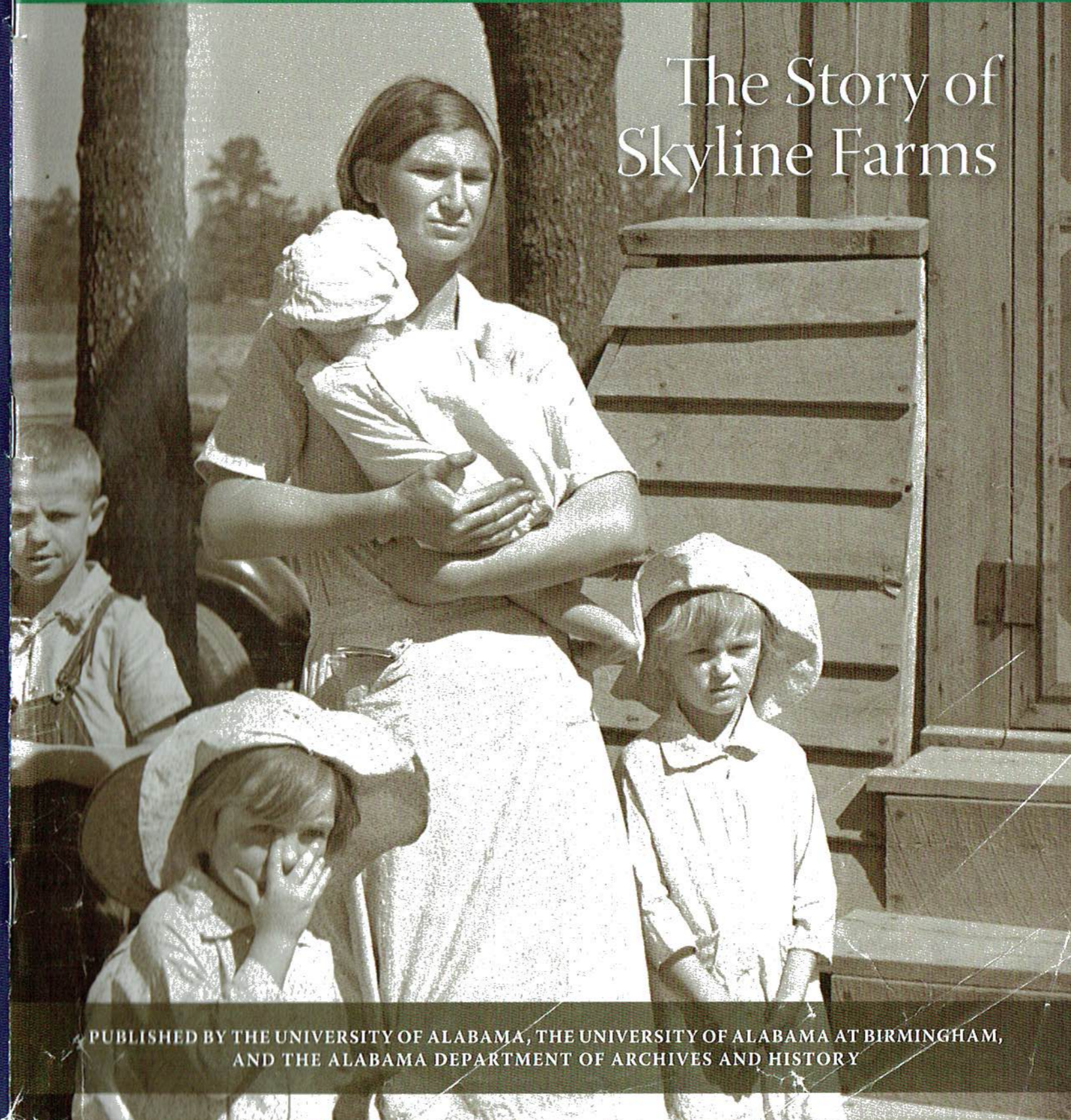


Alabama Heritage

The Story of Skyline Farms



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SKYLINE FARMS: A NEW DEAL COMMUNITY

Skyline Farms, created in 1934 as a program of the Federal Emergency Relief Agency, provided purpose and a new life for Alabamians affected by the Great Depression.

By CYNTHIA RICE

Regular square dances encouraged a sense of community among the families resettled in Skyline Farms. The dance band, led by Mary McClain on fiddle and Chester Allen on guitar and vocals, achieved national renown when they performed for President Roosevelt in Washington, DC, in 1938. (All photos Library of Congress)

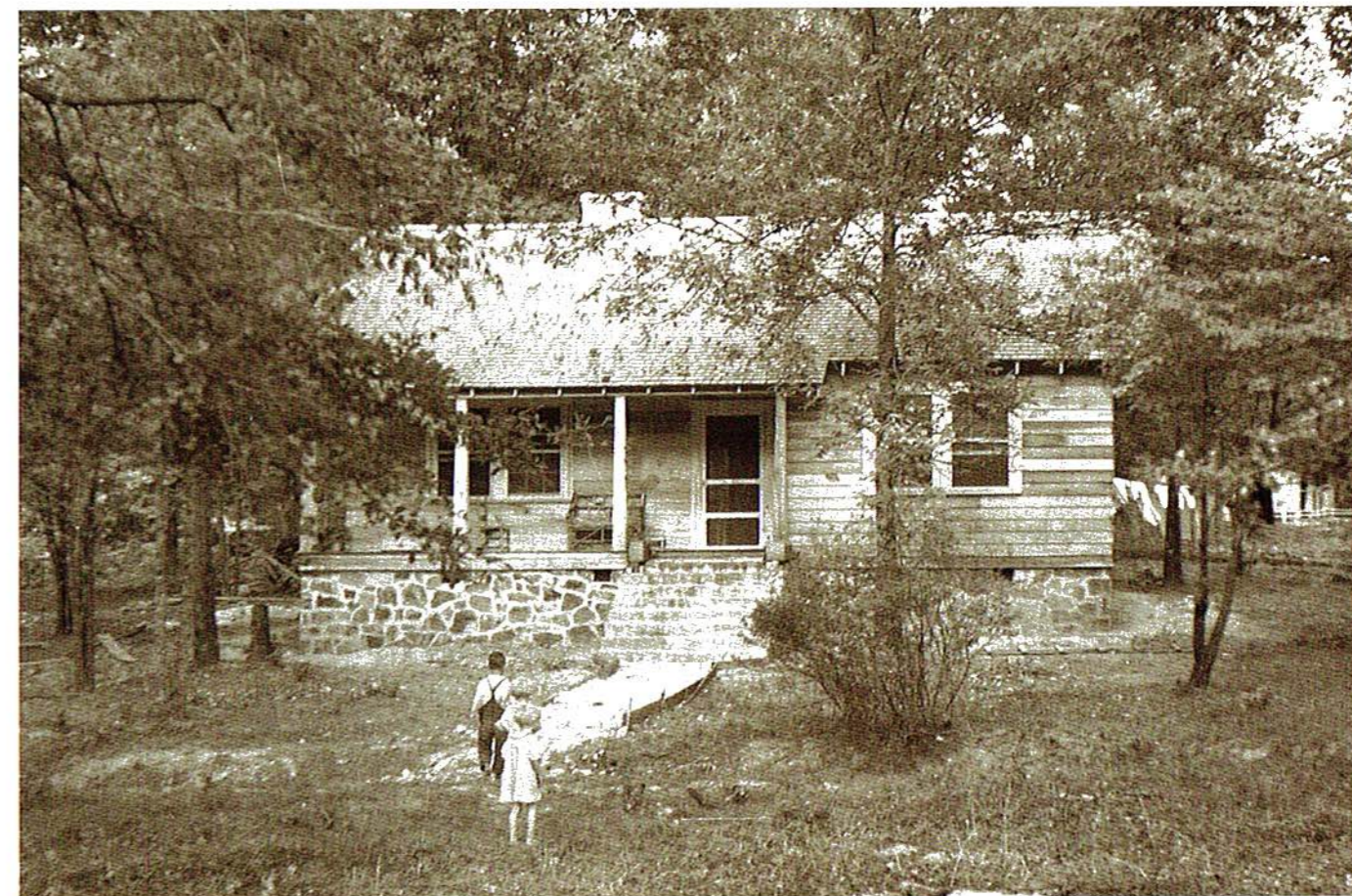
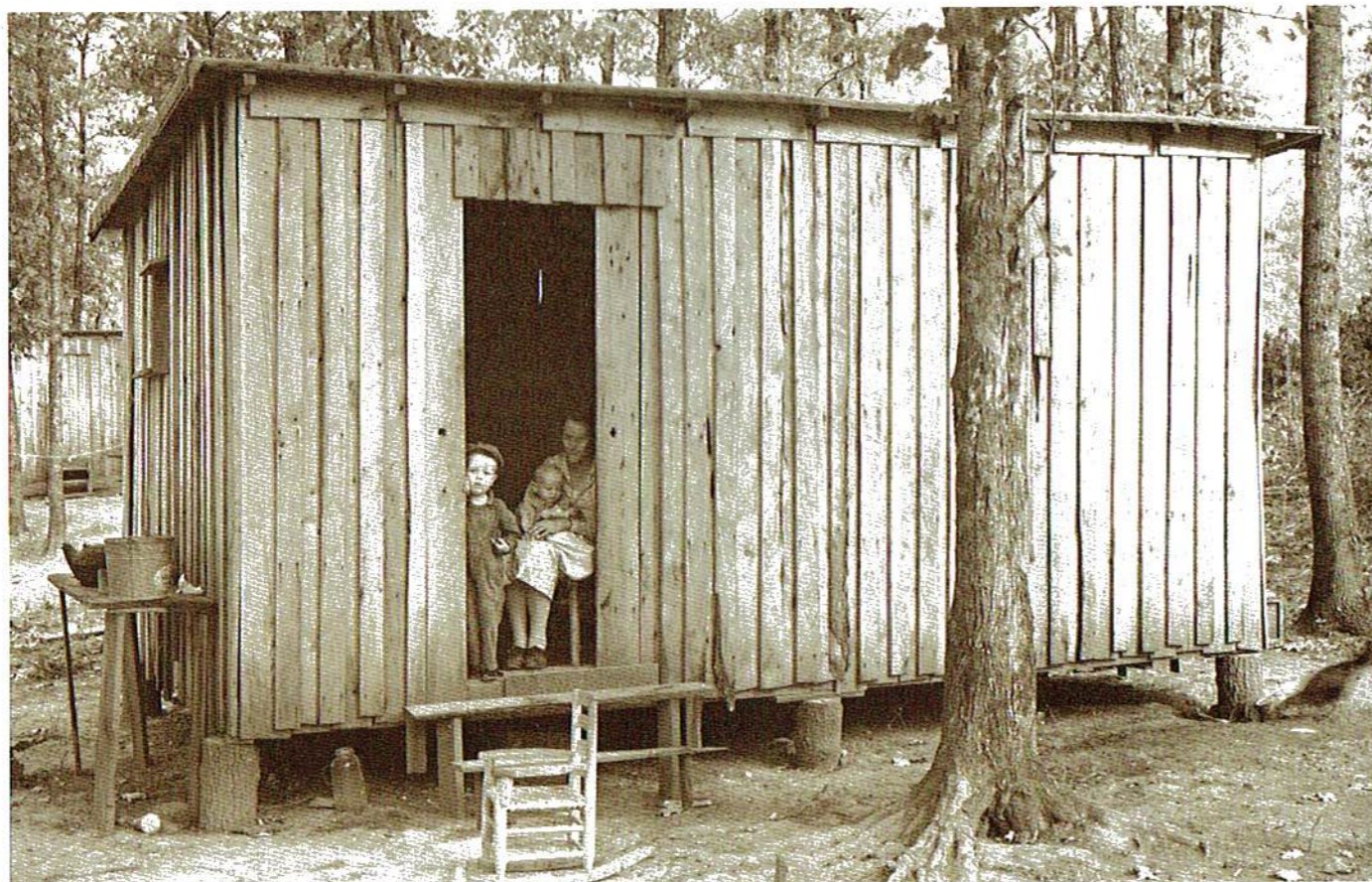
Judge Money and the commission then turned their attention to the new Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which formed in 1934 and was planning new homesteading colonies.

THOUGH MANY ALABAMIANS KNOW ABOUT Gee's Bend and its famous quilters, most are unfamiliar with another community founded by the government during the Great Depression. The Cumberland Mountain Farms Project, later known as Skyline Farms, began as a program of the Federal Emergency Relief Agency in 1934. Located in Jackson County, Alabama, and one of forty-three such projects established around the United States, the community helped impoverished Alabama farmers and their families, allowing them to live and work in their local areas and earn a living through the sale of their crops. Those who lived there were already on the local relief rolls in the area. The remains of this vibrant community include a school, commissary (now a museum), colony office building, factory, warehouse, cotton gin, and approximately one half of the original colony houses. The history of Skyline Farms illuminates the lives of often-forgotten men, women, and

children who survived through the power of hard work and community support.

The genesis of Skyline Farms began with Judge J. M. Money, the Probate Judge of Jackson County and chairman of the Jackson County Rehabilitation Committee in the 1930s. The depression hit his area hard, and he sought relief for those in need. He saw the implementation of Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt's new government programs and jumped at any opportunities that would help local people on relief rolls in his area. Along with the Board of Commissioners of Jackson County, Money voted to purchase four trucks through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. These trucks were used to transport men to various work relief programs. One such program was the plan to build a roadway from the valley at Maynards Cove up to and across Cumberland Mountain to Paint Rock Valley.

Only men on the relief rolls were eligible for hire in these programs. Of the 5,000 men who applied to work on this proj-



OPPOSITE PAGE: Temporary housing was provided to families who were evicted from their homes when landlords discovered the man of the household was living in the Skyline barracks. ABOVE: The houses had a porch, living room, kitchen, and from one to three bedrooms (depending on the size of the family), but they lacked electricity or indoor plumbing. Many still stand in the town of Skyline, but most have been remodeled.

ect, 3,500 were hired along with 73 overseers. So that the labor could be evenly distributed, shifts were staggered among the workers, allowing each man to work ten hours a day for two days a week at a rate of one dollar per day. Clyde Money, son of Judge Money, remembered that an unspecified number of men were unable to afford shoes, so Judge Money personally traveled to Birmingham to buy shoes for them. Clyde participated in his father's efforts to help the men, transporting sledge hammers, pick axes, shovels, and wheelbarrows to the work trucks every morning. Others helped as well, such as Hal Cunningham, who lived at the base of the mountain and donated sweet potatoes from his crop for the men to eat. Using oxen supplied by Jackson County to move trees from the path, the men worked to cut this five-mile stretch of road

through the mountain without any heavy equipment, though dynamite was used when necessary. The project, which began in March 1933, ended with the opening of the road and a barbecue on November 1. More than one thousand people attended the celebration. In just eight months, the five-mile stretch of road had been successfully completed.

Judge Money and the commission then turned their attention to the new Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which formed in 1934 and was planning new homesteading colonies. There were two types of colonies: suburban colonies and rural colonies. Both were designed to give families an opportunity to become homeowners and self-sufficient citizens. Judge Money and the members of the Jackson County Rehabilitation Commission went to Montgomery on November 30, 1934, to present their ideas to the FERA. During this time, Drs. F. D. and R. V. Pierce, brothers from Buffalo, New York, who owned over eight thousand acres on Cumberland Mountain, expressed an interest in selling their land. The brothers' coal mining venture on the mountain from 1907 to 1920 had run its course. Because of the rich soil, abundant natural resources, and extensive acreage, Judge Money and the commission felt that Cumberland

Mountain would make an ideal location for a rural colony. On December 7, 1934, approval for the colony was received in the mail, and the Cumberland Mountain Farms colony became one of the first twenty-five such colonies across the nation. Gee's Bend in Wilcox County and Prairie Farms in Macon County were the other two colonies established in Alabama.

The initial plan was to have two hundred farm families living at the new Cumberland Mountain Farms colony. The families were screened for their moral character, age, and farm experience. To be eligible, they also needed to be on the relief rolls. Each family received approximately forty acres. Though the land payment was to be spread out over a period of years, the exact payment and the length of time to pay never seemed to be clear to the colonists.

In addition to their acreage and homes, each family received a barn, a smokehouse, an outhouse, a mule, a wagon,

and an apple tree. They could borrow funds for groceries, crop supplies, and the cost of their home. Each man, no matter which job he held, was credited fifteen cents an hour for his work.

A barracks provided housing during the week for many men from the first families selected. Soon, a workshop was built, and a mess hall with six cooks provided meals for everyone. Unfortunately, when some landlords in the county found out that some men were living in the colony barracks during the week while their families continued to live in rental homes, many of the families were evicted from their rental homes. The colony organizers also decided that it was best not to separate families. Approximately seventy one-room shacks were constructed for the displaced families.

Building the homes was a community effort. Plans for the homes were similar, with two, three, or four bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. Size depended on the number

Some men working in the colony cut the trees to make clearings for the homes, while others took the cut trees by wagons and oxen to one of the colony's four sawmills.



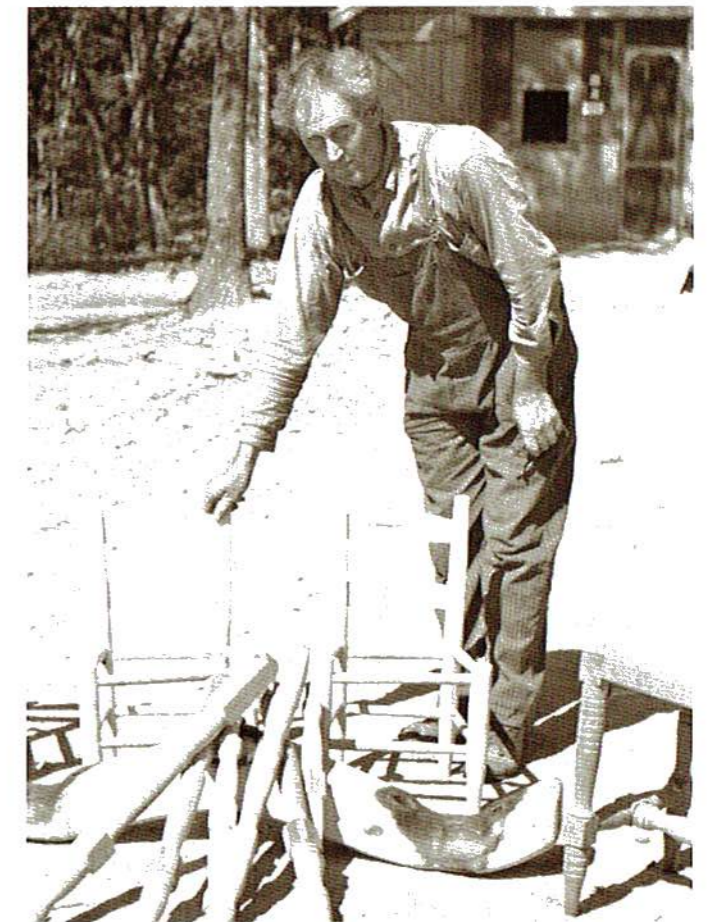
first house built in the colony. The entire community worked to build the five-room home (consisting of a kitchen, living room, and three bedrooms) and provide the Edmonds family with furniture and other necessary items. Along with approximately 180 homes built, the workers also built a sandstone commissary (today's Rock Store). On July 4, 1935, the cornerstone was placed for this building. The commissary, originally called the Cumberland Homesteads Co-op, was the center for trade in the community. Each family joined the commissary and brought their extra crops to sell. The commissary also took orders for farming supplies and sold any necessary groceries not grown by the colonists. Sewing supplies, shoes, toiletries, farm equipment—almost anything imaginable—were located at the commissary. By 1937 the

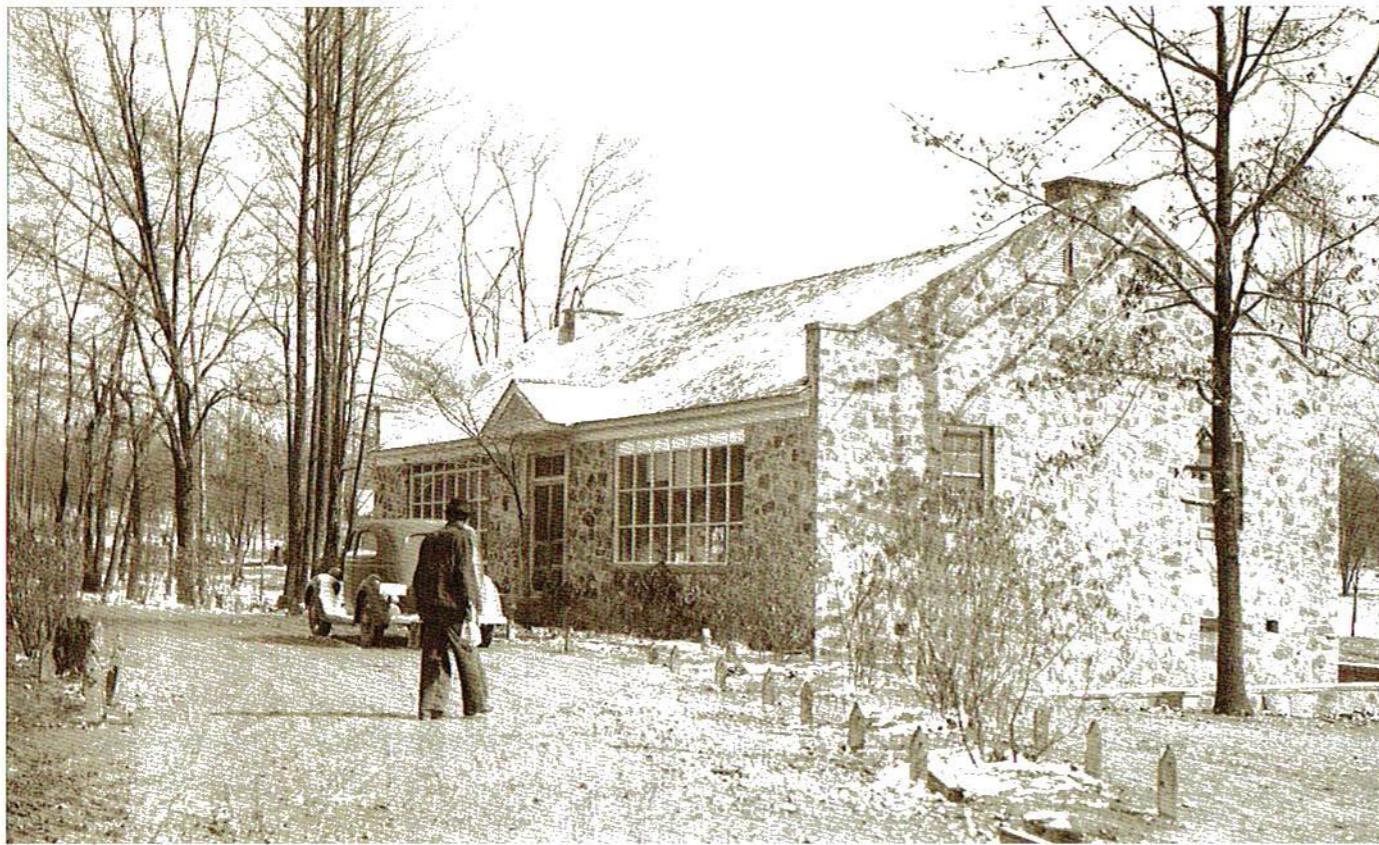
Materials for the houses and buildings at Skyline Farms were all produced on site. The resettled farmers took different jobs depending on their levels of experience, from working at one of the four sawmills (opposite page), to quarrying sandstone (left), to making furniture (below). Instruction was provided for the more skilled occupations. The pay was fifteen cents per hour regardless of the nature of the job.

of people in the family, and the appearance varied somewhat based on the direction it was situated and the placement of porches. If the home was painted, the color was standard green. No provisions were made for indoor plumbing, electricity, or water, though each home had a well. Outouses and sheds for animals were built as needed.

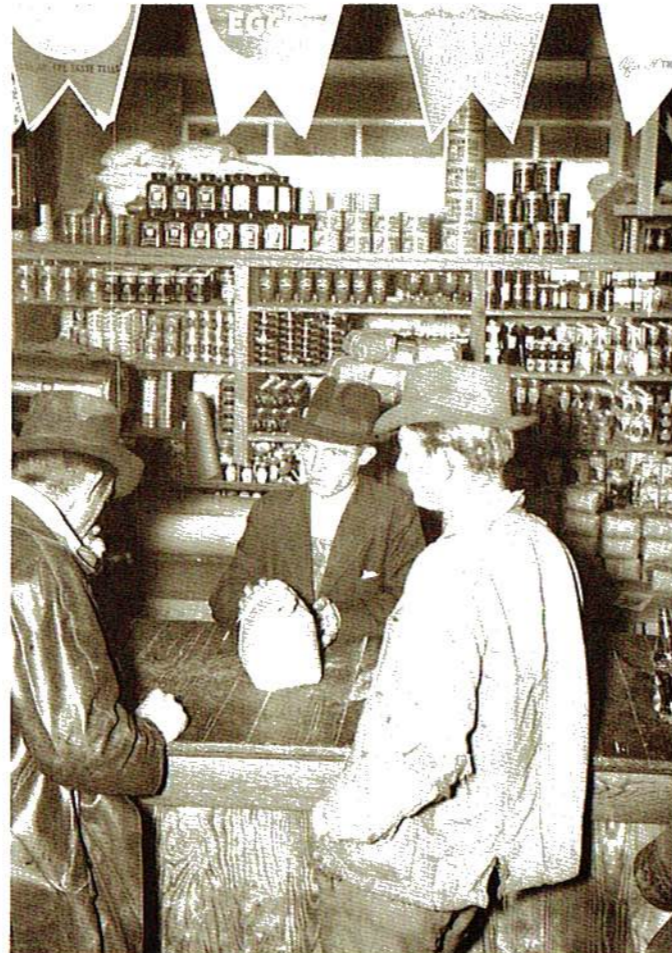
Some men working in the colony cut the trees to make clearings for the homes, while others took the cut trees by wagons and oxen to one of the colony's four sawmills. Though oxen were the first work animals, they were soon replaced with mules. Tractors powered the blades at the sawmills, turning the cut trees into lumber for homes and furniture. Other men of the colony worked in the rock quarry getting the sandstone out of the mountain for foundations, chimneys, and community buildings. Still others worked as carpenters, rock layers, roofers, and furniture makers. Specialists were brought in to teach the men how to do specific jobs, such as how to split wood to make shingles or lay bricks to make fireplaces. By building the homes and the community buildings, the men learned trades that would help them in the future.

On February 14, 1935, Crawford Edmonds, his wife, their six children, and a nephew and his wife all moved into the





The cornerstone for the Skyline Farms commissary, seen here with a sprinkling of snow (above), was laid in 1935, and by 1937 an additional wing was needed. It was located across the street from the colony office. The commissary provided a welcome meeting place for the farmers (right), but it could be a long and lonely walk back home hauling the family groceries, especially in the winter (opposite page).



commissary needed more space, and a wing was added to the building.

In 1937 Cumberland Mountain Farms saw additional construction, completing offices for Harry Ross, the head of the colony; B. J. East, the head of construction; J. C. Walls, the surveyor for the homesteads; and space for several secretaries. The colony office (known today as the Rock House) was located directly across the street from the commissary. The colonists soon borrowed for their crops at the colony office. They could cross the street to purchase their goods at the commissary. Finally, they would go behind the commissary to the warehouse to pick up their supplies.

A cotton gin was built behind the warehouse; however, cotton did not grow well on the colony's land, so the building was used as a sorting space for crops. Other buildings included a grist mill and a blacksmith shop.

E DUCATION ALSO PLAYED AN IMPORTANT role within the community. The first school, located near the mess hall and the workshop, was constructed from wood. Chairs were made from tree stumps, often with the bark still on them, with boards nailed to them for seats and backs.

With the increase in school-age population, a larger school was needed. The Works Progress Administration provided a \$25,000 grant for the new school, and W. H. Kessler, a prominent architect, helped with the design. The new school was completed below budget at \$21,277 and opened in 1938. Made of sandstone, it consisted of eleven classrooms with 285 children in attendance. The auditorium was finished later, being dedicated on May 7, 1938. This school

would provide education for children through the ninth grade. Today, this building, locally called the Rock School, is in use as the Skyline Elementary School.

Based on recommendations from the State Department of Education, a decision was made to place the students into classrooms based on their education level rather than their age. School had not been available to many of these children before. Of the 285 children, 173 were in the first grade, ranging in age from 6 to 18 years old, with 50 of them 10 years old or older. The placement experiment proved unsuccessful, and soon the students were reassigned to classrooms based on their ages. As recommended by the Resettlement Administration Public Health Section, students were required to have a medical exam and to be immunized before they

The colonists soon borrowed for their crops at the colony office. They could cross the street to purchase their goods at the commissary. Finally, they would go behind the commissary to the warehouse to pick up their supplies.





ABOVE: Skyline Farms' first wooden school was furnished with rough-hewn seats made of tree trunks and planks. This boys' class is taking advantage of a nice day to read outdoors. RIGHT: Children play with a ball during recess under the watchful eye of teacher Lila Beason. OPPOSITE PAGE: An early class at the Skyline Farms school, showing students of varied ages. Later, the school reorganized the grades by age.

started school. The colony provided a full-time nurse and a part-time doctor for colonists. Each family paid \$.50 per month, with a \$5.00 fee for a birth.

In addition to the placement experiment, other very progressive experiments in education were first tried in the colony's school. For example, at the time the Cumberland Mountain Farms Colony school was the only one in Alabama that taught home economics and agricultural courses for junior high students. State and federal experts also offered adults education courses in arts and crafts and homemaking. The women learned how to sew and repair clothing, construct rugs, and make quilts and mattresses. They also learned how to preserve food by canning the produce grown in their gardens. Canneries were built in several places



around the colony. Later, the government issued pressure cookers to the families. The women were also taught about housekeeping and cleanliness.

Later, the schoolchildren were an important part of the renaming of Cumberland Mountain Farms. Early on in the colony's settlement, confusion developed between it and a similar project located in Crossville, Tennessee, called the Cumberland Homestead. The Alabama children were given the opportunity to suggest a new name for the colony, with a

prize awarded to the person offering the chosen name. Many names were suggested, including Alabama Mountain Farms, Alabama Skyline Farms, Alto, Roosevelt, Happy Farms, Jackson County Farms, Evergreen Farms, and Rossville. A school girl with the last name Murphy suggested Skyline Farms because as she approached the school, she could see the sky touch the land. Mr. R. W. Hudgens of the Resettlement Administration picked the name of Skyline Farms as the winner, and Murphy was awarded \$25.

THE GOVERNMENT WANTED SKYLINE FARMS to develop a sense of community and encouraged bonding through recreational activities. Charles Seeger, a music advisor for the Resettlement Administration, was in charge of placing someone who could promote music and dancing at Skyline. Seeger chose Bascom Lamar Lunsford, a festival promoter and champion of Appalachian folk mu-

sic who recorded over three hundred songs, to teach music and dancing. Lunsford also held the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville, North Carolina, each year to highlight the best of the mountain performers. The Skyline Farms Band was formed, and square dances were held on the weekends. In addition to the band, Mary McClain, a member of the colony, played her fiddle for the square dancers, and Chester Allen, another colony resident, became the lead singer. Lunsford invited both the band and the square dancers to participate in the Mountain Folk Festival in August 1937.

The next year First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited the band and square dancers to Washington, DC, to perform at a White House garden party for women executives from government departments. According to Roger Allen, Chester Allen's son, the first lady sent cars for the band members and square dancers, along with money for the group's travel. On May 12, 1938, Chester and the band performed songs

Based on recommendations from the State Department of Education, a decision was made to place the students into classrooms based on their education level rather than their age.



such as “Alabama Jubilee,” “Fox Chase,” “Cacklin Hen,” and “Ol’ Rattler”—a song in which Chester howled like a dog for an estimated 2,323 guests, the president, and the first lady. President Roosevelt loved Chester singing “Ol’ Rattler” so much that he laughed, slapped his knees, and had the band perform the song again. While in Washington, the group toured several sites, including the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Capitol while Congress was in session. When the group



returned to Skyline, a thank-you note and the remaining fifteen dollars of the travel fund were mailed to the first lady. Eleanor returned the money to the colony with a note requesting that the colonists buy something for the community, and they purchased curtains for the school auditorium. Unfortunately, the Rock School burned on January 4, 1941. Though it was repaired and rebuilt, the curtains and a picture of Mrs. Roosevelt were lost in the fire.

On June 8, 1939, Lunsford was invited back to Washington, DC, by the president and first lady. Lunsford, along with other prominent artists, performed before King George VI and Elizabeth, parents of the current Queen Elizabeth II, on their first trip to the United States. Lunsford invited the Skyline Farms Square Dancers to perform with him in front of the monarchs.

Between 1935 and 1937, Roy Emerson Stryker, Chief Historian of the Resettlement Administration, sent three photographers to record life in the colony. Arthur Rothstein, the first photographer sent there, concentrated on construction of the colony and those who lived there. Carl Mydans, who came a year later, photographed the school children. Shortly after this assignment, Mydans went to work for *Life* magazine, and several of his Skyline pictures are in the *Life* magazine archives. Ben Shahn came to Skyline in 1937. He had seen the band and square dancers at the Mountain Folk Festival in North Carolina and was

Guitarist and vocalist Chester Allen, on the right, and members of the Skyline Farms Band perform at one of the colony's regular square dances. The band performed for President and Mrs. Roosevelt at a concert in Washington, DC, in 1938.

interested in photographing them. Shahn was primarily an artist and intended his photographs to be used later for paintings. His interest in photography did not last long, and Shahn left the Resettlement Administration soon after his work at Skyline Farms.

AS THE 1930S BEGAN TO CLOSE, INDUSTRY in the area began to pick up. On August 31, 1938, Skyline Farms residents learned that a hosiery mill was coming to the area. The mill, designed by architect Alfred Marks, was managed by the Dexdale Hosiery Mill of Lansdale, Pennsylvania. A.K. Adams & Co. began construction of the mill on November 29 of that year. The design included a water tower for fire protection and glass blocks around the building for light. The mill employees were members of the colonists' families who were not involved with building the colony or working the farms. Several employees went to Lansdale, Pennsylvania, to be trained. When they returned, they trained the other employees. The mill ultimately did not succeed because nylon became scarce with the United

Chester and the band performed songs such as “Alabama Jubilee,” “Fox Chase,” “Cacklin Hen,” and “Ol’ Rattler”—a song in which Chester howled like a dog for an estimated 2,323 guests, the president, and the first lady.

States' entry into World War II. Because of the mill, however, electricity was brought to the area in 1939, and fifty families signed up for electric service. With electricity, life for the colony families improved. But more change was coming to the Skyline Farms colony—including some changes that would disrupt the community irrevocably.

By 1944 the government was uncomfortable with running the colonies because some congressmen felt that the colonies were promoting Socialism. The Farm Security Administration became part of the Farmers' Home Corporation, and the colonies were to be liquidated. When government officials came to Skyline Farms to implement changes in 1945, they explained that if the families did not have the required amount for down payments for their farms, they would need to leave. This came as a great shock to the families, who had put their hearts into their homes and who never really understood the amount of payment that was required of them. Of all of the colonists, only one family, the Clay Paradise family, was able to save its property. Though many of the colonists left, they eventually moved back to the area.

Some have asked whether the colony was a success or a failure. Despite the hardships, however, many believe the experiment held more good than evil. In the words of Joyce Money Kenamer, daughter of Judge Money, “It did furnish jobs for desperate souls. They did live in substantial homes and grow sufficient crops for their needs. They did learn new methods of farming and preserving. They were furnished recreational activities. They were provided an excellent school for their children's education. They were furnished medical care.” Though the colony did not continue in its original configuration, today the colonial site is home to a wonderful town, Skyline, located on Cumberland Mountain between Scottsboro, Alabama, and the Tennessee border.

The effect of Skyline Farms is a distinctive part of the current town of Skyline. The Rock House, Rock School, Rock Store, warehouse, mill, and cotton gin still exist today. The Rock House is currently owned by the Skyline Farms Heritage Association. The heritage association—a nonprofit organization organized to preserve, restore, and protect historic buildings—is in the process of rehabilitating the Rock

House. When funds become available, they plan to use the building as a research library.

The Rock School is currently used for the Skyline Elementary School. It was extensively remodeled in 2000 at a cost of \$1.9 million and is now a museum featuring the history of the colony. The museum has had a great deal of community interest and participation, and many have donated or loaned to the museum oral histories, photographs, papers, deeds, and other memorabilia. Some very important items, such as Chester Allen's guitar and the first telephone at Skyline Farms, are loaned to the museum on special occasions. The cotton gin is privately owned, as is the warehouse, which is being preserved for future use; however, the cotton gin was damaged by fire several years ago and needs extensive repairs. The mill is currently home to rope manufacturer Buccaneer Rope. In addition to these buildings, many of the colony homes remain, though most have been extensively remodeled.

The town of Skyline was incorporated in 1983. Today the population is around 850 within the city limits, with many more living in the surrounding areas. The town contains a bank, drug store, auto parts store, tire store, health clinic, dollar store, gas station, and several restaurants, auto repair shops, and small industries. The town also offers police protection, a large community center, a town hall, and a volunteer fire department. The school has grown from one building for the elementary school to include other buildings, such as a high school, new gym, library, family and consumer science building, and lunchroom.

Skyline Farms was built by people with vision, faith in the future, and a willingness to put in the hard work and cooperation necessary to create a community. Though during the Depression many Americans felt disenfranchised and helpless, the residents of Skyline regained a sense of purpose, autonomy, and relevance. As the great American author Studs Terkel said, “When you become part of something, in some way you count. It could be a march; it could be a rally, even a brief one. You're part of something, and you suddenly realize you count. To count is very important.” What the people of Skyline Farms accomplished also counted, and their spirit remains in the community today.