Excerpt from *At Ease: Stories I Tell My Friends*, by Dwight D. Eisenhower

Perhaps, as I settled into campus routine, I might have become an occasional visitor to the lecture halls. Both Mamie and I were becoming very comfortable at Columbia, certain that ahead of us lay no sudden summons which would take us away from university life. We were so sure, in fact, that after more than a third of a century of married life, we began to think about buying a house and farm to which we could retire when my campus days were over.

While I was Chief of Staff, Mamie and I frequently discussed the sort of home that would fit us best, if we ever got one. On several occasions, we actually began making specific plans. These never got beyond sketchy scratchings. We knew that years would pass before we could do anything more than dream and talk. Now, after leaving the military and moving into Columbia, we started thinking again about a place of our own. The topic recurred regularly at Morningside Heights. For my part, I wanted an escape from concrete into the countryside. Mamie, who had spent a lifetime adjusting herself to other people's house designs, or the lack of them, wanted a place that conformed to her notions of what a home should be. In the fall of 1950, we finally did something about it.

George and Mary Allen had recently bought a small farm in the Gettysburg area, a mile or so south of the battlefield. On it was a stone house dating back to the eighteenth century which Mary planned to restore. They urged us to consider the same sort of move. We would be within easy traveling distance of Washington and New York and we could reach any spot in the United States quickly. The idea was attractive. After all, Gettysburg had been significant in the early years of our married life and our

sentimental attachments to it were reinforced by its significance in American, as well as our personal, history.

So, one weekend, we left New York with the Allens on a farm hunting expedition. Of all the properties we saw, the one most appealing was a farm of not quite 190 acres. The house, dwarfed by an immense barn, was located at the end of a private dirt lane a half mile long.

The buildings had seen better days. So had the soil. It would take work and money to modernize it. But the view of the mountains to the west was good.

Mamie had found the place she wanted. To complete the story, I must move ahead in time. Shortly after we bought the property, we were ordered back to Europe and once again our plans for the home we had in mind were deferred. And later, entering the White House in 1953, Mamie said, “I still have no home of my own.” This had become such a touchy point with her that she had made up her mind, come what may, to build her own.

She started off by deciding to restore the old farmhouse located on the ground we had bought. I had an engineering survey made and found, much to Mamie’s dismay, that she could not really rebuild. While the house had a face of brick, much of it was actually a log cabin, with a brick veneer covering its walls. The logs were moldy and worm-eaten, about two hundred years old. There was nothing to do but tear the place down.

So anxious was Mamie to retain even a fragment of the original structure, that when she found one portion of the wall and a Dutch oven in which no logs had been used, she built a complete house around them. We could not enlarge the basement

because the house stood on a rocky ridge. This meant that to a certain extent the pattern of the house was already predetermined.

I went to a builder, Charles Tompkins, a friend of ours, and asked whether he would undertake construction of the building on a cost-plus basis. He said that his own work was largely in heavy construction, but he would be delighted to take on the job and would do it without charging for anything overhead.

Because he had no prepared architectural plans, the house had to be built step by step, according to Mamie's ideas. Building this way, work frequently had to be redone. Mamie occasionally forgot a detail or two. For example, when the walls were going up, we discovered that no plans had been made for central air-conditioning. Part of the walls had to be torn down so that air ducts could be installed. We found that electric switches were not in the proper places. Other work had to be done over because of our improvised design. But the work was done well and the house, although not completely convenient, did conform largely to her ideas.

Before the building began, Charlie Tompkins asked me whether I wanted to use union labor or local labor, which was not unionized but which he considered competent. I told him that as President of the United States, I would be dealing with unions and I thought it only proper to use union labor. When the house was finished, he told me that he had kept two sets of books–one of the costs actually incurred and the other of what the cost had been if we had used local labor. The additional expense was $65,000.

This involved much more than a mere difference in wages, of course. It was caused by the transport of laborers, in some instances from Washington, requiring us to

pay for an eight-hour day for four hours' work, with the other hours spent in traveling to and from the job. The jurisdictional strikes in Pennsylvania delayed the work and finally, when the bill was handed to us, it amounted to $215,000. This did include $45,000 for projects and improvements on other than the house itself.

This was considerably more than Mamie had thought of spending at the outset. But during construction, we began to scrape the barrel. Mamie had some money accumulated through the years and helped by her mother, she willingly participated in meeting the costs. By mid-1955, we had a place that we could call home—and it was paid for.

From that time onward, whenever Mamie saw a piece of furniture or an article that she wanted to own, she had a place to send it rather than depending on storage facilities in Washington or elsewhere. We have now lived in our home for eleven years—counting the time spent in it on weekends during the latter part of my Presidency. While it is beautiful to us, like our home builders, we have found things we would like to change. But we have learned to live with our mistakes.

And we have learned, too, that one room can constitute a home. All the others are hardly more than support or embellishment. At Gettysburg, the important room is a glasses-in porch, not much larger than a modest living room, where we spend hours from early breakfast to late evening. Facing east, with the morning sun brightening it and in shadow through the heat of a summer day, the furnishings casual and designed for comfort, both Mamie and I find it an oasis of relaxation. I don't expect that we will ever again attempt to build a house. Were we to do so, I think it would be built around such a porch.

Discussion Questions

- What reasons did Eisenhower give for why he and Mamie purchased their Gettysburg farm?
- What goals did Eisenhower have for the property?
- Why did having their own home mean so much to the Eisenhowers?
- If you could choose anywhere to live, where would you choose? If you could design your own home, what would it look like? (Think about what you enjoy doing, what brings you happiness, and what you want to accomplish.)