

**INTERPRETING DISABILITY THROUGH ARCHITECTURE:
FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT'S HYDE PARK ESTATE**

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ABSTRACT

At historic house museums, preservationists are responsible for continuously updating the site's interpretation in order to offer visitors information that will enhance their enjoyment and understanding of the site. In the case of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Hyde Park estate, a site that has been open to the public for nearly seventy years, the interpretation has always centered around a broad history of the man who lived there; to date, very little attention has been paid to the architecture of the estate.

As Roosevelt himself had a strong avocation for architecture and went so far as to use his interest in order to design wheelchair-accessible structures for himself on the site, the lack of discussion regarding the estates buildings is a missed opportunity. This thesis will examine the current interpretational techniques used at the site, analyze the importance of architecture to Roosevelt's private and public life, and offer ways in which FDR's designs and disability can be best interpreted through the site's buildings.

“The spirit of simplicity of the homes of our ancestors...
is a good influence on a civilization which to some of us seems
to be reverting to the more humble and honest ideals.”
– *Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1936*¹

“It is clear... that with the one possible exception of Thomas Jefferson,
no other American President has touched so deeply and so directly
the intellectual and artistic life of the nation.”
– *Archibald MacLeish, 1945*²

“I have never known a man who gave one a greater sense of security.
That was because I never heard him say that there was a problem
that he thought it was impossible to solve.”
– *Eleanor Roosevelt, 1949*³

¹ “Top Cottage,” *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1997.

² William B. Rhoads, “Franklin D. Roosevelt and Washington Architecture,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.*, Volume 52: 104.

³ Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember* (Harper & Brothers: New York) 1949.

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I. Introduction

In 1946, at the dedication of Springwood, the Hyde Park estate of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his family, as a national historic site, Eleanor Roosevelt said,

Life here had always a healing quality for him. It is his life and his character and his personality which will live with us and which will endure and be imparted to those who come to see the surroundings in which he grew to maturity... I think Franklin realized that the historic library, the house, and the peaceful resting place behind the high hedge with flowers blooming around it would perhaps mean something to the people of the United States. They would understand the rest and peace and strength, which he had gained here and perhaps learn to come, and go away with some sense of healing and courage themselves.⁴

Eleanor's words ring true to our current understanding of President Roosevelt's connection to Springwood, where he was born, maintained lifelong residence, and chose to be buried. The estate in Hyde Park, New York played multiple parts in the life of our 32nd President, only a few of which were alluded to in Eleanor's words. As in any home, Springwood was privy to both the public and the most private moments in its residents' lives. The Roosevelts generally lived in the public eye; as the President, and while holding various political offices prior thereto, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was constantly in the papers and on the radio, connecting with the American people. Yet, there were also parts of the Roosevelt lives that were not readily shared with the American public. There were the secrets and struggles that FDR kept hidden from the American people – most notably his polio and subsequent paralysis - and there were also his private passions, like his

⁴ Olin Dows, *Franklin Roosevelt at Hyde Park* (New York: American Artists Group, Inc., 1949), 180.

interest in architecture and design, that speak most ably to the unique relationship that he had with his Hudson Valley home.

An overarching discipline that speaks best to President Roosevelt's more private endeavors is architecture. When students of history learn the truth of President Roosevelt's disability during his time in office, the narrative is that of a politician using the lack of visual media (compared to today's 24-hour news cycle) and rhetoric in order to shield the American public from the truth of his condition. After all, in the 1930s physical and mental disabilities were often conflated. The story that is not told, however, is one that is best embodied by the built environment of the Springwood estate. That story is one of resilience, of a man who chose not to be continuously inhibited by his lack of movement and instead helped to design a number of buildings on the site that were accessible to his needs as well as relatable to his varied interests in the architectural field.⁵

Roosevelt personally designed, with the help of an associate architect, Top Cottage, his retreat on the estate. Constructed using styles and materials that were familiar in the Hudson Valley landscape, these structures had one major difference from the popular styles of the time: Roosevelt could enter, move about, and exit them while confined to his wheelchair. This intent of the design is not obvious, and that's exactly what Roosevelt desired. Perhaps because of this, the accessible buildings visible at the Springwood estate are rarely, if ever, recognized in that light.

⁵ FDR's attempts to create and invent in order to improve his day-to-day life did not all revolve around architecture. As an example, because he was also fond of driving, he worked to create hand controls, a cruder version of ones used today, which would allow him to continue to pilot his own automobile.

But it is not only in this light that architecture and design are ignored. Roosevelt's lifelong interest in the built environment is almost never considered in the interpretation of the Roosevelt estate. In fact, in most historic homes in the United States, architecture is rarely, if ever, the focus of interpretation. The lack of such discussion at Hyde Park, though, is a missed opportunity, if only because it provides so much insight into Roosevelt's more personal passions and difficulties.

Interpreting the home of a figure so integral to American history is no easy task. Visitors – some of whom, even today, vividly remember his presidency – arrive on site with their own opinions and biases. The interpretation is further complicated in this case by the fact that many historians and preservationists prefer to be sensitive to their subject; interpreting facts that the subject seemingly never wanted disclosed is a complex enterprise. Yet, Roosevelt's infantile paralysis is no longer a secret. Fourth grade textbooks disclose Roosevelt's disability alongside his revolutionary leadership. It is, then, the responsibility of preservationists and historians to reinterpret the story American students grew up hearing about a President stricken with a debilitating illness. Rather, interpreters can tell the story of a great man who faced a great challenge and, in part through ingenuity of design, was able to create a comfortable, accessible life for himself and his family.

Interpreting the President's disability through the built environment of Springwood is especially important as we continue into the twenty-first century. Over twenty years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Americans with disabilities are still a marginalized minority. As mentioned previously, Roosevelt's decision to hide his paralysis had much to do with how

mental and physical disabilities were equated in the past; there was no way a handicapped person would be elected president. We've come some way in the past eighty years, but the same fact still holds true. It seems highly unlikely that a handicapped person would be elected president today if the general electorate was aware of his or her condition.⁶

In May of 1997, President Bill Clinton, while on crutches following a knee injury, made his way toward a podium to address the crowd that had gathered for the dedication of The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC. Prior to the event, a controversy had arisen over the decision of the Memorial Commission to use a statue design from 1978 that showed Roosevelt seated, but not in a wheelchair. The Commission cited a desire to honor Roosevelt's own reluctance to be seen as handicapped and the exhausting lengths he went through not to appear disabled.⁷

Rick Douglas, director of the Disability Initiative at the Department of Labor, best expressed the feelings of those who demonstrated their disappointment and frustration in the decision. "This is a terrible mistake," said Douglas. "It's a shameful falsehood to people who are disabled. The message here is the myth and shame and bigotry associated with disability are still held tight by people who designed this memorial."⁸ Just before the dedication, President Clinton partially diffused the situation by recommending to the Senate that it vote on legislation that a statue

⁶ The exception to this rule would be someone like Bob Dole or John McCain, both of whom came very close to being the president and had debilitating arm injuries sustained in combat. That being said, their sustained injuries did not lead to the same level of disability faced by FDR.

⁷ Doug Struck, "Clinton Dedicates Memorial, Urges Americans to Emulate FDR," *Washington Post*, 3 May 1997: A01.

⁸ *Ibid.*

depicting President Roosevelt in a wheelchair be added to the memorial (Figure 1). The legislation passed through both the Senate and the House. What Douglas and his fellow protestors believed, what President Clinton was convinced of, and what the interpretation at Hyde Park should emphasize is one simple truth. To discuss Roosevelt's paralysis is not to highlight his flaws, but rather to highlight his strength, perseverance, and ingenuity in overcoming the obstacles of his disability.

Further, at a time when we are increasingly interested as a culture in our leaders' private lives (our culture has been bombarded in recent years with stories of President Clinton's infidelity, President George W. Bush's penchant for painting canines, and President Obama's tenacity on the basketball court), it is the perfect time to delve into the interests and avocations of other presidents. Architectural projects absorbed much of Roosevelt's adult life, even during his presidency, yet so few Americans are at all familiar with his interest in the field.

Interpreting architecture at Hyde Park would not only potentially provide additional insight into the life of a great, disabled American. It would further allow visitors to understand, on a deeper level, the passions and interests of one of the most beloved presidents in the history of the United States. Visitors come to Hyde Park in order to learn and experience life on the site as the president may have experienced it. The current interpretation, in its lack of discussion regarding architecture and design, does a disservice to visitors who are interested in discovering Roosevelt's interests, hobbies, and even struggles. This thesis strives to introduce a plan that will provide a more inclusive, holistic, and completed understanding of FDR.

II. History

The Roosevelt family traces its ownership of Springwood, the main home of their Hyde Park estate, to 1867, when it was first purchased by James Roosevelt II, Franklin D. Roosevelt's father.⁹¹⁰ James himself was seventh in a line of Roosevelts who were already prominent members of New York City society. It was the Roosevelts' Hyde Park roots, however, dating back to 1818, when James' grandfather moved to the Hudson River Valley, that led James to follow suit and settle in the country. In 1880, James married Sara Delano, a wealthy heiress who had grown up in Newburgh, a town very close to Hyde Park. At the time of the 1867 purchase, the Springwood home was a relatively modest farmhouse with a clapboard exterior (Figure 2). James is said to have disapproved of ostentation, so the austerity of the farmhouse fit perfectly into his ideal of country life.

The Hyde Park home was not the Roosevelts' only rural retreat; they also owned a summer home on Campobello, a remote Canadian island. Like many of the New York elite, the Roosevelts spent their winters associating with society members in New York City, but their summers were spent between their two country homes. Unlike their counterparts, however, the Roosevelts very soon considered Hyde Park to be their "home." James was, further, truly a lover of the outdoors, a passion he

⁹ For early history of the estate and the family, see: "Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt," brochure, 2004, available via the National Park Service.

¹⁰ James Roosevelt I (Franklin's great-grandfather) built his first home in the Hudson Valley in 1818. Located on the east side of Albany Post Road in Poughkeepsie, he named the estate Mount Hope. It was passed down to his son Isaac and then to James II. In 1865, the property burned down while James and his first wife Rebecca were travelling in Europe, at which point they sought to purchase Springwood. James would from then on be afraid of house fires and passed that fear onto his son. This is one of the reasons that FDR never installed an electric elevator in Springwood.

would later pass on to his son, Franklin. James spent his days in Hyde Park caring for his stable of horses, hunting, and fishing.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born in a small room on Springwood's second floor on January 30, 1882.¹¹ Though his father could have easily been his grandfather, due to James' advanced age at the time of Franklin's birth, the two shared a very close relationship. As soon as Franklin was old enough to ride, he was given his own horse – a Welsh pony named Debby – and began riding around the property with his father on a daily basis. They could spend a full day traversing the Springwood grounds, which occupied hundreds of acres just south of the village. As an only child, Franklin grew up with the understanding that he would one day inherit Springwood; this fact clearly enhanced his early and intense fondness for the property.

Though Franklin and James shared a strong bond, it was Sara who monitored his upbringing and day-to-day life. A rather dominant figure on the property, Sara also managed everything related to the Roosevelt's day-to-day life. As her inheritance was the source of most of the family's money, she was the keeper of the checkbook, and therefore, the key decision-maker.¹² Like other children of similar social standing, Franklin was homeschooled by his mother who, along with a series of governesses, guided his education within the confines of the estate. Franklin was still, however, given plenty of time to enjoy the outdoors. When he turned eleven,

¹¹ For FDR's early life, see: Russell Freedman, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Clarion Books: New York), 1990.

¹² Interestingly, a question commonly asked to the guides during the tour is why Sara was the one to run the family and "rule the roost," so to speak. The answer is always the same: Sara had the money so she had final say.

his father gave him a shotgun, with the understanding that Franklin would not hunt during nesting season and would only kill one of each type of bird indigenous to the area. His collection of stuffed and mounted birds grew rapidly – and remains on view in the home’s foyer to this day.

In 1896, Franklin enrolled at Groton, an elite Massachusetts preparatory school. It was at Groton that Franklin had one of his first encounters with his distant “Cousin Teddy,” who had been invited by the headmaster to speak with the students. In 1898, after Theodore Roosevelt’s election to the office of governor of New York, Franklin attended the inauguration in Albany with his parents, marking his first venture into the political world. Upon his graduation from Groton, Franklin matriculated to Harvard College as a member of the class of 1904. During his freshman year, Franklin faced the first tragedy of his young life when he was called home to Hyde Park to help bury his father. He stayed home briefly to care for his mother, but she soon pushed him back to Cambridge to continue his studies.

In January 1903, Sara hosted a twenty-first birthday party for her son at the estate; one of the young women invited to celebrate was Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin’s fifth cousin once removed. The two began a courtship and that summer Eleanor even joined Franklin at the family’s Campobello compound. During the Thanksgiving holiday of that same year, Franklin sat with his mother in Springwood and announced his intention to marry Eleanor. Though Sara did not disapprove of Eleanor – after all, she *was* a Roosevelt and her uncle Theodore was the sitting president – she was concerned that Franklin was too young to be making such a decision. Not to be deterred, Franklin invited Eleanor to join him at the annual

Harvard-Yale football game the following weekend and proposed. She said yes. They were married in March of 1905.

In the spring of 1907, after having attended just four semesters at Columbia University's School of Law, Franklin received notice that he had successfully passed his bar exams. He and Eleanor settled in a townhouse on New York City's Upper East Side; Sara lived in an adjacent unit and the two homes shared a wall that could be removed in order to allow for large functions. (The removable wall also allowed for Sara to monitor Franklin and Eleanor's household.) The newlyweds spent their weekends in Hyde Park and their summer holidays in Campobello, continuing Franklin's childhood traditions. Already, Franklin was bored with his chosen profession and talking about entering the politics. In 1910, the perfect opportunity presented itself when Democratic leaders from Dutchess County requested that Franklin run for the New York State Senate seat from the Twenty-sixth District, which included Hyde Park.

Campaigning through Dutchess, Columbia, and Putnam counties helped Franklin grow even more familiar with the Hudson Valley. The then twenty-eight year old fledgling politician also used his campaign stops to improve his oratorical style. Come Election Day, Roosevelt won the seat in a huge upset over his Republican opponent. By this point, Franklin was one of the state's best-known political figures and was widely regarded to be his cousin Theodore's likely political heir. When he arrived in Albany, the *New York Times* described him as "tall and lithe... With his handsome face and his form of supple strength he could make a

fortune on the stage.”¹³ (His perceived and actual strength would later go a long way to help Roosevelt in overcoming the limitations of his illness, both personally and in the public eye.)

Roosevelt’s political star had officially risen. After serving his term as state senator, Roosevelt was appointed the Assistant Secretary of the Navy under President Woodrow Wilson in 1913. He left that office in August of 1920, when he joined the campaign trail as the vice-presidential nominee on the ticket of Governor James M. Cox of Ohio. After Cox and Roosevelt lost the election to the Republican nominee, Warren G. Harding, Roosevelt returned home to New York to practice law and plan his next political move. The following August, however, while on vacation at his family’s summer cottage on Campobello, Roosevelt was faced with an unforeseeable and terrifying challenge.

On August 10, 1921, after a long day of sailing with his wife and his sons, James and Elliott, Roosevelt returned home to the Campobello cottage and soon began suffering from mild lower-back pain. Eleanor suggested he get some rest. Neither of them recognized the potentially serious implications of the fact that Franklin felt too tired and achy to properly undress himself. That night he headed up the stairs and went straight to bed; it was the last time he ever climbed a set of stairs unassisted. That evening marked the beginning of Roosevelt’s twenty-four-year struggle with infantile paralysis, more commonly known as polio.¹⁴

¹³ Freedman, 33.

¹⁴ For the history of Roosevelt’s infantile paralysis, see: Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe, *FDR’s Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability* (Texas A&M University Press), 2003.

Over the next two weeks, Roosevelt would receive a number of diagnoses, each more dire than the next, to explain his worsening lower-back and leg pain and his elevated temperature. Already, Eleanor feared the worst for Franklin's political career. She wrote a letter to Franklin's half-brother "Rosy" (James Roosevelt Roosevelt) that stated, "I do not want particulars to get in the papers so I am writing the family that he is ill from the effects of a chill and I hope will soon be better."¹⁵ Her pessimism was, unfortunately, well-founded. Just five days after he first began experiencing symptoms, his bowels and bladder had ceased working properly.

Naomi Rogers, the author of an early twentieth-century volume on polio, had illustrated that the disease was commonly associated with the poor, with immigrants, with "guilty carriers."¹⁶ Though Roosevelt could not have been further from the public perception of the *normal* polio sufferer, he would likely be unable to escape those associations. In electoral politics, perhaps the most visible professional realm, a man's ability to control his body was considered tantamount to his ability to do his job. A physical ailment may as well have been a mental ailment. On August 20, after Eleanor first received word that the likely culprit of Franklin's illness was polio, she was understandably devastated. She and Louis Howe, Roosevelt's political advisor and friend, wondered how they would relay the information to her ailing husband. Their worries for Franklin's health and mental well-being were coupled with fears for his political career.

A few days after learning of his diagnosis, Franklin received a letter from his uncle, Frederic Delano. Though Frederic's sister, Sara, wished her son would return

¹⁵ Houck and Kiewe, 11.

¹⁶ Ibid, 13.

to Hyde Park and spend his days focusing on his books and on his health, Uncle Fred reminded Franklin that he could overcome the limitations of his disease:

My dear Franklin, I spent a restless night last night and thought a good deal about you, wondering how I could be of some service and as a result of that cogitation, I came to the conclusion that I might give you some "Fatherly" advice... To my mind Philosophy means in substance, "making the best of the situation," or in other words taking things as they are, analyzing the facts, above all not fooling your self, and by intelligent reasoning determining the right course to pursue... I realize that you are up against a hard problem, and hard cruel facts, and yet I feel the utmost confidence that you will emerge a better and a stronger man.¹⁷

The remainder of Roosevelt's life and career was clearly spent taking his uncle's words to heart. This attitude, to focus on the issues he *could* improve, would be apparent in his political dealings, his personal life, and in his personal environment.

Roosevelt's ailment was finally made public on September 16 when the *New York Times* headline read, "F. D. Roosevelt Ill of Poliomyelitis."¹⁸ The prognosis printed in the paper, however, remained hopeful. The article claimed that fears of permanent injury of the attack were unfounded; he would not be crippled. While that turned out to be falsely optimistic, Franklin, Eleanor and Louis Howe were determined that his illness would not be Roosevelt's defining characteristic.

History shows that the three were successful in their quest. Following his initial diagnosis and several years of rehabilitation, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to the office of Governor of New York twice (in 1928 and 1930) and then to an unprecedented four terms in the office of President of the United States. He

¹⁷ Ibid, 17.

¹⁸ "F. D. Roosevelt Ill of Poliomyelitis," *The New York Times*, 16 September 1921.

skillfully led his country through both an economic crisis and a World War. He is remembered by millions as a strong and creative leader; his paralysis is, if anything, an afterthought.

It's not that his paralysis was a total secret (though there were many Americans at the time who were unaware of his disability), but for a number of reasons his physical limitations were not a major talking point. When he was first elected president in 1932, he had not stood or walked without some form of external support in over a decade. In a country where nearly all the presidents up to that point (and for some time after) had been white Protestant men of European descent, and of sound mind and able body, Roosevelt had clearly broken a mold. The lack of a 24-hour news cycle, as exists today, is one easy explanation as to why Americans may have not been fully aware of his disability. Photographs and newsreels of the president were much more deliberately handled and the White House had, at the time, a greater say as to what could be shown to the public. The fact that Roosevelt was elected in the midst of the Great Depression may have also helped shield his paralysis from the public. Besides the fact that the White House closely controlled the news reels and newspaper articles that were printed, there were other issues of the time that may have seemed far more important to the general public. The Depression might have caused Americans to be too worried about their own financial well-being to be concerned about the status of the president's legs. Others have posited that the disability actually made Roosevelt seem more empathetic or impressive.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sally Stein, "The President's Two Bodies," *American Art*, 18 (Spring 2004): 1.

The explanation that has best stood the test of time, however, is that which claims that his disability attracted minimal public concern because Roosevelt and his aids so ably disguised his infirmity. Roosevelt almost never spoke of his battle with polio publicly, was never photographed from his wheelchair, and, with the exception of his fireside chats, almost always delivered speeches from a standing position, often resting his body weight on podiums that were reinforced to handle the extra mass. It would be paying Roosevelt a great disservice, however, to focus solely on the ways in which he obscured his ailment. What is much more impressive are the ways in which he actively worked to ensure that his disability would not affect his ability to successfully navigate his day-to-day life. Roosevelt's attempts to build for himself an environment where he could easily live as 'normal' a life as possible are no more apparent than at his estate in Hyde Park.²⁰ Rather than be limited by physical spaces that did not accommodate his special needs, Roosevelt utilized his lifelong love of architecture to help alter existing spaces and build new ones.

Long before Roosevelt's illness, steps had already been taken to expand the Springwood home. In 1914, as Franklin and Eleanor's family grew, Franklin and his mother embarked on a project to both enlarge and modernize the home. As such, a wing was added and the façade, which was originally of modest clapboard, was converted to stucco and stone in a style that most resembled a Georgian manor, though the wings reflected the more vernacular Dutch Colonial stone design. (Figure 3) Around that same time, a non-electric elevator was installed behind the main

²⁰ While his world at the time encompassed a much larger area, including Warm Springs, Campobello, and of course Washington, Hyde Park was clearly his favorite and most personal retreat.

staircase. Its original purpose was to help transport steamer trunks from floor to floor.

After his infantile paralysis, however, the elevator served a much different purpose. Roosevelt's fear of house fires kept him from upgrading to an electric elevator, which he thought might bring dangerous wiring into his home. But luckily his years of rehabilitation and strength training left him with immense upper-body strength. (The better to appear to be standing up, but really supporting yourself with your arms.) Franklin, in order to get from the first to the second floor of Springwood, rather than relying on family or agents to carry him up the stairs, would get into the small elevator and hoist himself using the pulley system.

As Springwood was really his mother's house and not his, Franklin had to similarly make superficial adjustments to other parts of the house to accommodate his wheelchair. Ramps that could be easily removed when company arrived were installed in the front of the house and over the stairs that led to the sunken living room. The ramp towards the living room remains in the home to this day. The impermanence of the ramps speaks both to Roosevelt's desire not to physically alter his mother's home and his desire to, at least partially, obscure his need for assistance. Yet, the need to pull himself to the second floor, navigate narrow hallways, and move amongst a home that was, some might say, over-furnished, limited his movements. His inability to spend his days comfortably in Springwood, because of its design, the near-constant visitors, and his overbearing mother, drove Roosevelt to build Top Cottage, another home on the property, for his own personal retreat.

Franklin D. Roosevelt had long had a passion for architecture. In 1934, halfway through his first term as president, Roosevelt told members of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) that if he were a young man, he might well enter their profession.²¹ Ever since his youth, in fact, Roosevelt had been exposed to some of America's leading architectural minds. His family and neighbors had granted commissions to the likes of Frederick Clarke Withers, Charles Haight, and McKim, Mead and White.²² Travels through England and France further increased his interests, especially in the architecture of country homes. At Harvard, he enrolled in – and greatly enjoyed – Charles Herbert Moore's Fine Arts 4 (the Middle Ages and Renaissance), which acquainted him with architectural styles that he may not have yet experienced firsthand.²³

He expressed his interest in architecture throughout his adult life. He played an integral role in the re-design and expansion of his mother's home, Springwood, in 1915. Working with both his mother and the firm of Hoppin and Koen, the renovated house design became a combination of Georgian and the Dutch Colonial, which was more common to the Hudson Valley. While Sara favored the stucco exterior, Franklin was "able to persuade her to accept the added cost of wings built of native fieldstone, the traditional material of Hudson Valley buildings."²⁴

In 1925, FDR announced his intentions to build a cottage in Warm Springs, Georgia, where he had been working to regain the use of his legs in the local,

²¹ William B. Rhoads, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Architecture of Warm Springs," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 67, No. 1 (Spring 1983): 70.

²² William B. Rhoads, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Washington Architecture," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington D.C.*, 52 (1989): 105.

²³ *Ibid*, 105.

²⁴ William B. Rhoads, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dutch Colonial Architecture," *New York History*, 59, No. 4 (October 1978): 432.

naturally heated waters.²⁵ He began the process by sketching preliminary plans and elevations and then working closely in collaboration with Georgia architect Henry Toombs.²⁶ Just a year before, Toombs had first met Franklin and Eleanor while working with them as lead architect in designing Val-Kill cottage, Eleanor's retreat on the Hyde Park estate.

Further, in both of these projects, Toombs learned what a specific and demanding client and co-architect Roosevelt truly was. "In Dutchess County, Roosevelt took pains that the exterior walls of local fieldstone were properly laid; in Georgia he was similarly insistent on the character of the pine woodwork, which resembles that of early nineteenth-century vernacular interiors in the state."²⁷ Roosevelt was clearly not an architect or designer looking toward the future, but rather adamant about retaining the integrity of the past.

In the midst of these projects, Roosevelt also oversaw the construction of a swimming pool at Campobello and even government buildings in Washington, DC that were designed in part by Roosevelt. Yet, in 1938, after Roosevelt had overseen the construction of buildings around the country and homes for both his mother and his wife on the Hyde Park estate, he had the freedom to exercise this passion by designing and overseeing the construction of his own cottage on site. The property that Roosevelt selected to purchase for his retreat included Dutchess Hill, located just beyond Val-Kill, the site where Franklin had helped to build a similar, private cottage for Eleanor just a few years earlier. One of the highest points in the county,

²⁵ Rhoads, "Warm Springs," 73.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

Dutchess Hill boasted magnificent views that extended west across the Hudson River to the Catskill and Shawagunk mountains.²⁸

An early note written to his cousin Margaret “Daisy” Suckley indicates that Roosevelt knew almost immediately what kind of building he wanted to create.

You said once “log cabin” – But I don’t think so – even John Burrough’s – across the [Hudson] River – looked very artificial. They all do unless they are a hundred years old and then they are full of... crawly bugs. No, I think a one-story fieldstone two room house – just like the one William (or was it Gerardus?) Beekman lived in (without a doubt) when he (or they) first went to Esopus. One with very thick walls to protect us against the Indians and a little porch on the West side.²⁹

As far as the materials used and design type, Roosevelt decided upon that of a traditional Dutch Colonial cottage, such as the ones that were common around the Hudson River Valley. Roosevelt drew the original sketches for the cottage himself, and then enlisted the assistance of Henry J. Toombs to complete the project.

The finished product incorporated specific designs that would accommodate his disability, while also fitting in perfectly with the general design aesthetic of the Hudson Valley. However, there were some specific portions of the design that were clearly completed to accommodate Roosevelt’s disability. The lowered windows, which, notably, are also a common trope in Dutch Colonial design, allowed views of the outdoors and his favorite trees while he was in a seated position. Doors without raised saddles or sills, entries to the house without barriers or steps, and a ramp from the porch to the grounds granted easy access to a man in a wheelchair. There were other notable conveniences, such as an electrical outlet placed directly beside

²⁸ John G. Waite Associates, *The President as Architect* (Mount Idea Press: Albany, New York 2001): 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

his favorite sitting chair so that he could personally make toast for his guests during teatime.³⁰ Perhaps more to the point, the cottage provided accessibility, but the purpose of the design would not be too obvious to a visitor. Entering the house, nothing immediately indicated the handicap of its primary tenant. Further, this type of design which allowed for universal access was well ahead of its time.

Roosevelt would never spend a night at Top Cottage (Figure 4), partly because of his mother's wishes, and it also did not become the solitary retreat he had originally envisioned. But it *would* play host to a number of dignitaries. The Roosevelts famously hosted a picnic in honor of the visiting King and Queen of England, just before the start of the Second World War. Sara was mortified that that her son and daughter-in-law treated the royals to a feast that included common hot dogs. Winston Churchill would also commonly join Roosevelt on the porch of Top Cottage to discuss political and wartime strategy while looking upon the Valley.

FDR's next project would be to help design what would become the nation's first presidential library.³¹ (Figure 5) He began conceiving of the library in 1939, near the end of his second term, clearly not expecting to be elected twice more. As the majority of the Hyde Park estate was still in his mother's name, Franklin had to request that she donate sixteen acres of the property for its construction; she begrudgingly agreed. The library, Roosevelt's own innovative idea, was intended to house historical papers, books, and memorabilia that Roosevelt had accumulated

³⁰ Waite, 9.

³¹ For history of the Library, see: "History of the FDR Library and Museum," *Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum*, available at: <<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/library/history.html>>.

through his life; unlike past presidents, Roosevelt acknowledged the importance of these items to posterity.

Similar to Top Cottage, the Library was constructed of local Hudson Valley fieldstone and designed in a manner owing to Dutch Colonial architecture. The building was also, like Top Cottage, fully accessible. After spending nearly \$400,000 of his own money to finance the project, following its completion in 1940, FDR turned the building over to the government, to be operated by the National Archives. The president's actions would become precedent, prompting future presidents to take similar actions in order to preserve the history of their lives and presidencies.³²

After being elected president twice more, Franklin D. Roosevelt passed away on April 12, 1945 of a cerebral hemorrhage while vacationing in Warm Springs, Georgia.³³ On the morning of April 13, Roosevelt's coffin was transported by train to Washington, DC for a funeral the following day. The next day, the coffin was once more transported by train to Hyde Park, where Franklin had chosen to be buried. As a direct result of his decision, the Roosevelt's Hyde Park estate is the only site in America where a president was born, lived, and is buried.

Two years before his death, and following his mother's passing when Roosevelt was named heir to the land, President Roosevelt had donated his home and thirty-three acres of the land on which it stood to the American people, on the condition that his family be allowed to use it after his death.³⁴ The land was formally transferred to the Department of the Interior on November 21, 1945, when the

³² In 1955, Congress finally passed the Presidential Libraries Act, which formally required the process by which Roosevelt had preserved his legacy.

³³ Today, we would be familiar with this ailment as a 'stroke'.

³⁴ "Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt," brochure, available via the National Park Service.

family relinquished its rights.³⁵ Since that time, the Hyde Park estate has been active as a National Park Service site, catering to hundreds of thousands of tourists each year.

³⁵ Even after this transfer, Eleanor continued to use Val-Kill and Elliott Roosevelt – Franklin and Eleanor’s son – lived in Top Cottage, as they were not part of the donated acreage.

III. Current Interpretation

This section is divided into two parts. Part I describes tours that are offered to visitors of the Hyde Park estate. (Figures 6 and 7) Part II is an analysis of those tours.

Part I: The Tours

The tours, as described in the following pages, are an amalgamation of my personal experiences after visiting the site and taking the tours of Springwood, the main house on the Hyde Park estate, and Top Cottage multiple times between September 2012 and February 2013. The descriptions are compilations of multiple tours with multiple tour guides, edited to highlight the similarities between the tours. I have chosen to focus on broad themes as well as key vignettes utilized by the tour guides. These should foster an understanding of the means by which the tour guides help the visitors to understand both the site and the Roosevelt family as a whole.

Springwood:

Arriving at Franklin Roosevelt's Hyde Park estate, visitors are immediately welcomed by an expansive estate, providing a respite from the busy road by which you reach the home. A number of older buildings, some which were previously part of the Bellefield estate and are now the National Park Service headquarters, line the

driveway leading to the Henry A. Wallace Visitor and Education Center.³⁶ (Figure 8) It is in the Wallace Center that visitors can purchase tickets for tours, view an introductory video about the Roosevelt family, visit the gift shop, study in the education center, and meet the tour guide to begin a tour of the estate's main home, Springwood.

The tour group meets inside the visitor center atop a large tile mosaic (Figure 9) that acts as a map of the estate and its various structures. Here, the tour guide gives the group some basic information about where they are, what they are about to see, and who they are going to discuss. After providing some brief Roosevelt history, the group begins the walk by exiting out the back of the Wallace Center and walking past the rear of the Presidential Library, toward the rose garden. The Library is discussed briefly, mainly focusing on the fact that it was constructed in 1941, was the first federally run presidential library, and can be visited daily. Facing the rose garden, where Franklin and Eleanor (and their beloved dog, Fala) are buried, the tour guide offers visitors the opportunity to view the grave and, in season, the many species of rose that populate the garden. (Figure 10)

The rose garden is directly adjacent to stables where Mrs. Roosevelt kept her horses. From the rose garden, visitors walk the driveway toward the stable and are urged by the tour guide to press a button that plays an audio recording of Eleanor speaking of her stable and her horses. Walking from the stable toward Springwood, the tour guide stops at the end of a driveway that leads toward Route 9 and tells the

³⁶ Opened in 2003, the Wallace Center was the first new facility to be constructed on the estate since the completion of the Library in 1941. It was named for Henry A. Wallace who served as the Secretary of Agriculture from 1933 to 1940 and also served as Roosevelt's Vice President during his third term in office.

story of how when Roosevelt was originally in recovery from his polio, it was his goal to be able to walk with his crutches and then eventually walk unassisted down the entire, expansive driveway toward the main road.

From there, visitors continue up the drive to Springwood, and stop in front of the large house. At this point, the guide will provide some basic historical facts and insights into the house, including when it was originally purchased by James Roosevelt, how it was expanded in 1915 and made to look as it does today, and how Springwood was never under Roosevelt's ownership until the last few years of his life; Springwood was the property of his mother Sara until her death in 1941.

Visitors then gather in the entryway, where the guide will allude to a number of items that are immediately visible, such as Roosevelt's collection of stuffed birds that are in a hutch in the corner, the fire retardant that is kept in a bulb next to the front door, and the ramp that leads down to the living room. The guide discusses Roosevelt's disability in reference to the ramp and also mentions the elevator on the right hand side, which, because it was not electric (as Roosevelt had a fear of house fires), Roosevelt would use to pull himself up toward the second floor. (Figure 11)

After allowing visitors to walk the foyer and the hallway in order to view (but not enter) the dining room, sitting room, snuggery, and living room, visitors are allowed, in small groups due to the cramped space, to walk up the stairs to the second floor. While there is no formal guidance through the second floor, a guide is there to answer any questions. Of the assorted bedrooms that visitors can see (but not enter) most are drawn to the bedroom in which Roosevelt himself was born. It is

unclear from any of these rooms whether or not any measures were taken to make the upstairs area more accessible for Roosevelt.

Once visitors have seen all of the rooms on the second floor, they exit via an outdoor stairway that leads down the back of the house. The top landing of the staircase provides an incredible view of the scenic Hudson Valley. The exit marks the end of the tour. From there, visitors are encouraged to visit the library, walk the property, or return to the Wallace Center where a visitor can meet for a tour of another house on the property.

Top Cottage:

The process of attending a tour of Top Cottage, Roosevelt's private cottage on the estate, is a much more relaxed endeavor. The visitor is instructed to meet a tour guide in front of the visitor center in order to be transported via bus to the property.³⁷ After a ten to fifteen minute drive, during which the guide may speak to the group, pointing out sights along the way, the group is let out directly in front of Top Cottage.

The guide provides some background information, specifically important dates and the fact that Roosevelt personally designed the cottage. After entering the front door, guests are allowed to spend between five and ten minutes exploring most of the downstairs of Top Cottage, save the servants quarters, which are blocked off. Guests are not allowed to climb the stairs to the upper level, which had

³⁷ While during Roosevelt's day, he had been able to drive to Top Cottage from Springwood in less than five minutes, today, because some of the property that Roosevelt used to drive through does not belong to the National Park Service, the bus must take a more circuitous route.

been built specifically as rooms for Roosevelt's help. The interior of the cottage, like Springwood, contains furnishings left behind after Roosevelt's death.³⁸ (Figure 12)

Once visitors have meandered around the particularly small building, they are instructed by the tour guide to join him or her on the porch. The group works together to rearrange the chairs and other pieces of outdoor furniture, none of which are original, and take their seats. At this point, visitors are welcome to participate in an open forum. They can ask the guide any questions about the site or they can simply look out onto the beautiful Hudson Valley grounds that surround the cottage. The guide may read some passages from Daisy Suckley's book of published letters, many of which speak directly to her and Franklin's experiences in Top Cottage.

Because so much of this particular tour is left up to the questions of the visitors, the conversation can go in any direction. The relaxed nature of this particular tour is fitting to the bucolic setting of the cottage. Rather than take a rote tour of the property, visitors are invited to use the property as Roosevelt would have used it; they sit on the porch, look out onto nature, and have lively discussion.

³⁸ Elliott Roosevelt lived in the cottage after his father's death and once the property was given to the National Park Service, original furnishings were rearranged to mirror what would have been in the property when Roosevelt lived there.

Part II: Breakdown

A visitor to the Roosevelt estate in Hyde Park can arrive with high expectations and leave fulfilled. The site itself is beautiful, centered in the scenic Hudson River Valley, which Franklin Roosevelt so loved. The grounds and buildings are beautifully maintained. Dependent upon one's feelings towards Dutch Colonial-style architecture, most of the buildings on the site are also well-designed. The experience of visiting the estate, however, has little to do with what a visitor sees; it, rather, has everything to do with what a visitor hears. The guides act, officially, as the voice of the property.

When arriving at the site, National Park Service (NPS) park rangers and a variety of other staff are on hand to offer you tickets for admission, sell you books and souvenirs available in the gift shop, and – most importantly – act as your guides throughout the property. There are no audio tours at Springwood and very few placards or expository signs.³⁹ There are brochures on site, the most informative of which is titled, “Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt,” and was printed in 2004. The brochure provides a brief history of Roosevelt's life, focusing on his early years, his beginnings in politics, and his historic presidency. It also provides some specific historic information about Springwood and the Library. The section on the Library does mention that FDR designed the building, but does not delve further. To learn

³⁹ The fact that the estate does not offer an audio tour is especially interesting since Acoustiguide, the world's largest audio guide production company, claims on its website that the very first audio tour ever created was a tour of Hyde Park narrated by Eleanor Roosevelt herself. (This information is available at <www.acoustiguide.com/company-profile>.)

any more about the site and the Roosevelt family, the visitors are almost totally dependent upon the tour guide assigned to their group.

The guides – all NPS park rangers and notably well-versed on the subjects at hand – are afforded a lot of freedom in the types of tours they conduct, according to Franceska Macsali-Urbin, the Supervisory Park Ranger for the site.⁴⁰ There is no script for guides to study or follow; besides being required to read a particular biography (Geoffrey Ward's Before the Trumpet), which focuses on Roosevelt's early life in Hyde Park, and shadow a more experienced guide, there is no formal training. In the words of Frank Futral, a curator at the Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Sites:

Because we have ranger guided tours, the focus of your tour is going to be directed in some way by the person leading it, and then add to that, by the questions that come up from the group that's on the tour. But we don't have a pre-scripted interpretive outline that everyone has to stick to.⁴¹

The open-endedness of the tours given by the guides means that often the focus of the tour is dictated by visitor questions. This means two things: first, a visitor will be able to leave having (hopefully) learned something that piqued his interest; second, an overly inquisitive participant can very easily derail a tour.

⁴⁰ Interview with Franceska Macsali-Urbin, February 21, 2013, Hyde Park, New York.

⁴¹ Quoted in: Tatum Alana Taylor, "Concealed Certainty and Undeniable Conjecture: Interpreting Marginalized Heritage," Masters Thesis, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University in the City of New York (2012), 74.

The only particular documentation regarding how a tour guide should conduct a tour at Springwood comes in the form of a series of potential talking points written down by Mascali-Urbin:

Tour Stories⁴²

1. The Roosevelt estate consisted of land FDR owned and land that his mother owned. FDR decided that he wanted to have the Library built on the grounds of the Roosevelt estate. The place he felt was the perfect spot was not owned by FDR. It belonged to his mother. Sara was opposed to it. She felt it would create lack of privacy. But FDR was determined. He decided that he would eventually get his mother to “see the light”. So he went ahead with his plans, designed the library and set aside a date and special ceremony for the official transfer of land from his mother to the federal government, thinking that by the time that date arrived, he would have his mother’s signature on the deed of transfer – which he needed to have in order to make the transaction legal. The date arrived, no signature and his mother had gone off on a trip to Europe and was unreachable. So FDR had the ceremony anyway. He handed over this piece of paper – without the signature – convinced that he would eventually talk his mother into it. And he did. (Story shows FDR’s determination – but also the relationship between a mother and her son.)
2. The story of FDR’s determination to walk again by attempting to walk down the path from the house to Route 9. Trying again and again, but not succeeding, but he didn’t give up. Spirit of determination carried into presidency.
3. Fala being dubbed “the informer” by the Secret Service. He traveled with FDR fairly often. The Secret Service was to try to keep the President’s presence on the train a secret for security purposes. But when the Secret Service disembarked from the train to walk Fala (since FDR couldn’t) it gave FDR’s presence on the train away. Hence the name – The Informer.
4. FDR being interested in studying birds. The way to do that back then, before computers was to shoot and stuff them. FDR’s father allowed

⁴² The “Tour Stories” are available via Franceska Mascali-Urbin at the Interpreter Headquarters on the Roosevelt estate. The text, including the title, has been transposed verbatim from the papers available to the NPS guides.

the hobby, but told him he had to learn it from start to finish. So FDR had to take taxidermy lessons to learn how to stuff the birds – all part of the hobby. FDR did not like the taxidermy part and wanted to quit. But his father made him finish the lessons. He wanted FDR to learn the importance of finishing what you begin – even if it was something you did not enjoy doing. His father also told FDR he could only shoot one male and one female of each species of bird – an important lesson in conservation.

5. FDR loved to collect political cartoons – the ones in the hallway [of Springwood] poke fun at British Royalty. When the royals were to visit in 1939, Sara told FDR that he should remove the cartoons – which might be offensive to them. FDR said he was not going to remove them as they had always been there. When the King and Queen came in the front door – the first thing the King spotted were the cartoons. He was drawn like a magnet to them. Everyone was standing around a bit concerned as to what would happen next. Everyone was thinking international incident. After studying them for a few minutes, the King turned to FDR and said with a smile, “You have some in your collection I don’t have in mine.”
6. Talk about FDR the Great Communicator on radio – Fireside Chats – a great informational tool and a way of connecting the public to the President. Here was a person who spent his early years without electricity or any kind of technology, yet he was the Master of Radio. Television was invented during his lifetime. He was the first President to be on television (at the NY State World’s Fair). He did not like it and felt it was a passing fad. (Visitors are asked to find the television in the house – which is unlike the televisions of today.)
7. FDR as a boy working on his stamp collection as his mother was attempting to read to him. Annoyed she said, “Franklin you can’t possibly be listening to anything that I am reading to you.” He then repeated word for word the last several sentences she had read. FDR said, “Mama, I would be really ashamed if I could not do at least two things at the same time.” (Multi-tasking – a great skill for a president to have.)
8. Christmas allows us to talk about holiday traditions in the Roosevelt family. This would include the reading of Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, the selection of the tree from FDR’s tree plantations. (Proud of his trees – FDR sent one overseas to Winston Churchill.) Using real candles, the gifts, the servants part in Christmas, the meals, etc.

9. The visit of royalty gives us a chance to talk about the fact that this was not the average household, but sometimes the same kinds of mishaps occurred as in an average household – like the spilling of drinks, the collapse of a table, Sara’s frugality, etc.
10. Sara was the manager of the estate until she died [in 1941]. FDR was not allowed to change anything to make things cost effective. She was very traditional and did not like change. One day some Vassar girls came to visit and have lunch. They were there to interview the President. One of them asked a question about what FDR was planning to do about the budget. Sara piped up, “Budget – Franklin knows nothing about the budget. I handle the budget.” She of course was talking about the estate – not the country’s budget.
11. The story of FDR’s disability and coping at home and in the public eye. How polio changed him physically and spiritually. Adversity not standing in his way to achieving his dream.
12. We are living in the house that FDR built – what he did that we use today.
13. The house becoming part of the NPS – the how and why.

These talking-points, perhaps better defined as thematic stories, are well-liked and well-used by the guides, though they are by no means required to invoke all or any of the stories in any particular tour. Guides generally intermix these stories with the information they learned from the required readings; many do additional studying on their own time in order to provide a more informational tour.

The flexibility and freedom afforded to the guides means that it is highly unlikely that a visitor will ever hear the same tour twice. This fact, of course, has both an upside and a downside. Variety is important, both for the guide and the visitors. The ability to hear different narratives from different people is an important part of the educational process. The lack of formal training or scripting, however, may also lead to a guide who does not have a great deal of information to impart to the visitors. (From personal experience, however, having a less-than-

stellar tour is far less likely than taking a tour in which the guide is particularly knowledgeable and passionate about the Roosevelt family and the site. I could only cite one of the ten tour guides I have worked with as having been sub-par.)

The other interesting piece of the puzzle – and maybe another reason why there isn't a defined script for guides to follow – is that there is no current, published interpretation of the site available. Countless American historic homes have books specifically written to discuss the site, its history, and its continued importance. The Roosevelt estate has none that it has personally commissioned. Even in the site's own book shop, the only written account of the site (and only the main home, Springwood, and Top Cottage are discussed) is in *The Great Estates Region of the Hudson River Valley*, which was published by the Historic Hudson Valley Press in 2007. The lack of substantive published materials is surprising, but might further attest to the complexity of the site and its interpretation.

In recent years, as more information about Franklin Roosevelt has become public, either through published letters or biographies, it is more common for guests to the site to ask questions regarding Roosevelt's personal life. It is not news at this point that Roosevelt had extramarital affairs with Lucy Mercer and possibly his distant cousin Daisy Suckley. In the country's current social climate where gossip reigns supreme, it is also no surprise that visitors would be interested in this subject matter. These questions, however, create an interesting predicament for the guides conducting the tours.

Because there is no defined set of rules for how to conduct a tour of the site, there is also no set of official rules as to how to answer these questions. The site's

official stance on the matter is not to have an official stance. Again, according to Frank Futral:

If we had to sit down and write some kind of a document that said, 'this is what we think' or what our position is, that would probably be much more difficult... History is interpretation, and even among ourselves here, we're going to have a difference of opinion on how you would retell that story, where you'd place the emphasis. If we had to write an audio tour where everybody was going to hear the same thing, I don't know how we'd do that.⁴³

This position-less position places the site and its interpretational staff in an interesting predicament. In not taking a stance, they are allowing individual guides to rewrite the narrative on the site's behalf. The fact that a visitor can visit the site twice, ask the same question, and receive different answers has the potential to lead to either confusion *or* a better understanding of the complexity of the subject matter.

There is, of course, another subject regarding the estate that had been for years decidedly difficult to discuss: Roosevelt's paralysis. It makes sense, though, that in recent years as more and more information about his disability has been published and absorbed by the American public, people would feel the need to discuss this important aspect of Roosevelt's life. The addition of the statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair at his Washington, DC memorial, for example, was a major turning point in the narrative of Roosevelt as our first and only disabled president. Further, as the stigma of physical impairment relaxed during the 1980s and 1990s, it likely became a more socially acceptable topic to discuss during the question and answer sessions of tours, as well. Unlike Roosevelt's apparent extra-marital dalliances – another example of a part of his life Roosevelt kept hidden from the

⁴³ Taylor: 75.

American public – guides at Hyde Park are currently encouraged to discuss the paralysis and how it affected his daily life on the estate. His paralysis, however, is only brought up in relation to objects within the homes, not the actual structures or environment.

Though it certainly might detract slightly from a visitor's experience, the lack of an official stance on certain difficult topics or the nonexistence of current published interpretational materials is not an issue that undermines the process of interpreting the estate as a whole. However, the highlights of taking a tour of the Roosevelt estate, such as the beauty of the site, the original furnishings, and the professional restoration, are unfortunately marred by the site's resistance to interpret its own built fabric. The piece of the puzzle that is most missed in the interpretation of the site, as displayed in tours of Springwood and Top Cottage, is the overall lack of discussion of architecture. Knowing that Roosevelt was an avid lover of architecture, considered himself to be an amateur architect, and even used architecture as a means to increase his quality of life, this omission is even more jarring. At a site so dedicated to preserving the memory of a great president, one would expect that an activity so central to his life in Hyde Park would be discussed at great length. The pertinent questions seem to be, *why isn't architecture currently discussed on site and how and why should this issue be corrected moving forward?*

IV. Analysis

The lack of discussion regarding architecture in the current interpretation of the Roosevelt estate in Hyde Park, New York is an enormous missed opportunity. The architecture visible on the estate speaks to Roosevelt's life and legacy in two important ways: first, it is an example of one of his great life passions; second, it provides insight as to how Roosevelt used practical means in order to overcome the obstacle of his physical disability. If the primary purpose of interpretation at FDR's estate is to introduce visitors to the president's more private life, his passion and utilization of architecture in order to cope with his disability is a topic that absolutely should be addressed. Yet, it is not.

With this fact in mind, it is first important to establish *why* exactly architecture is not utilized in the site's interpretational strategy. The most obvious answer to this question is that architecture is generally not discussed at many house museums. Especially in historic homes that are significant (or judged as significant) due to their owners or inhabitants, the narrative concerns the ways in which the occupants used the space rather than the space itself.

It is clear from discussions with some of Hyde Park's staff members that the lack of focus on the site's architecture is not merely an oversight; rather, it is a conscious decision. It is assumed by the staff that the general public just isn't interested in architecture as a field. In the words of Diane Boyce, the former historian and interpreter of the FDR estate,

I don't think people do that... I don't think people think that much about [architecture]. If you have an academic group that comes,

they're more interested in the architecture... I don't think a lot of people are all that interested. Although, when we first opened top cottage, I had written a tour to come back down through the village, so we could show people the town library that Sara had endowed and the Post Office and other things around that FDR had been involved in the village... but that was very small. They might have gone away with more of an appreciation of the architecture, but there weren't many people that wanted to take it and it wasn't something that children would be interested in... But I don't think the average visitor [would be interested]... I don't know that people really zero in on the architecture.⁴⁴

Ms. Boyce's response highlights a number of assumptions that are likely made by interpreters on the site, namely that architecture is a passion only of the most academic of groups and would bore the average visitor. She even indicated that she once wrote a tour that tried to focus on architecture around the town of Hyde Park, but attendance numbers were sparse. From this experience, she, along with her colleagues, seem to have gathered that a focus on architecture was not a worthwhile interpretive endeavor. This response, however, seems to be an unfair generalization to place upon the general public. Even if we *were* to accept as a given that visitors don't journey to Hyde Park to view the architecture, that doesn't mean that the topic should be ignored so completely. If visitors arrive without any interest in the built environment, why wouldn't the accepted practice be to teach them to appreciate something new?

Further, as architectural tourism becomes more popular (think of how many people visit Frank Lloyd Wright's houses or the Eames House in Los Angeles each year) the assumption that the general public is disinterested in architecture seems

⁴⁴ Interview conducted with Diane Boyce by the author, February 21, 2013, Hyde Park, New York; recording available upon request.

even more outdated and incorrect. Ms. Boyce's statement sounds more like an excuse not to try something new than a reasonable defense. To make such assumptions about the general public, that they are inherently disinterested in more specific academic pursuits, does not give enough credit to the site's visitors while additionally limiting the scope of the site's interpretational methods.

It's already been addressed that architecture generally isn't discussed at many historic homes. So, why should Hyde Park be held to a different standard? Well, at most historic homes that are significant due to the life of the owner or inhabitant, the important person had nothing to do with the design or construction of the home. That is not the case here. Further, at most historic homes, the subject did not have a lifelong passion for architecture. Again, that is not the case here. In fact, these circumstances call to mind another presidential historic home where architecture *is*, in fact, interpreted for all of these same reasons: Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

Monticello, which was designed and built by Jefferson himself over a period of forty years (though it was never truly complete), is considered to be Jefferson's architectural masterpiece. Jefferson, who had a deep intellectual involvement in architecture for much of his life, is thought to be a truly talented architect in his own right. *The New York Times* even recently referred to Monticello as "the *piece de resistance* of presidential homes."⁴⁵ While Monticello is, of course, a presidential house museum, similar to Mount Vernon or the Roosevelt estate in Hyde Park, its tour does not necessarily follow the same patterns of its counterparts. In fact, much

⁴⁵ Todd Pitcock, "Pennsylvania and Virginia, Where the Nation Was Shaped," *The New York Times*, 8 March 2013.

of the focus of the tour and interpretation does happen to center around the site's architecture. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on the Monticello website, for example, lists the following options: How high are the ceilings? What are the overall dimensions? Where did the windows come from?⁴⁶ These questions, among others, indicate an inherent interest in the design, layout, and construction of Monticello, an interest that is not immediately found at other presidential sites like Hyde Park.

Knowing that Thomas Jefferson was another President of the United States who himself enjoyed architecture as a passion, and further knowing that Monticello's interpretation has a strong focus on architecture, one might wonder why the same efforts could not be made at Hyde Park. It would be inaccurate to compare Jefferson and Roosevelt on an equal plane as architects; according to architectural scholar William B. Rhoads, FDR's drawings "usually took the form of hastily sketched plans on the backs of discarded memos or envelopes, his personal library was sorely deficient in the standard of architectural texts, and his architectural taste was distinctly conservative and conventional."⁴⁷ However, there is no reason that equal talent should be a prerequisite for similar modes of interpretation. What is clear is that both men had great interest in the field of architecture, both men played a large role in shaping the design of their home environments, and a focus on those interests could shape a visitor's understanding of the man about whom they came to learn.

⁴⁶ "Monticello (House) FAQ," *Monticello*, accessed 22 March 2013, available: <<http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/monticello-house-faq>>.

⁴⁷ "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Washington Architecture," 104.

While Roosevelt was not necessarily an architect of immense talent, architecture was still an important part of his life. As mentioned previously, he became interested in architecture from an early age, and was especially fond of vernacular styles of the Hudson River Valley. His efforts in the redesign of his mother's home, Springwood, marked the first step in his growth as an amateur architect. The project also introduced Roosevelt's propensity for historic preservation, in his insistence that the project use stone obtained from the walls that ran through the Roosevelt lands to cover the wings.⁴⁸ He joined the Dutchess County Historical Society in 1914, the year of its founding.⁴⁹ Yet it was after his polio attack in 1921 that FDR's interest in Hudson Valley vernacular architecture grew.

The time spent back at his old home, recuperating from his illness, clearly increased his fondness for his surroundings. In 1923, for example, Roosevelt wrote an introduction to a book published by The Holland Society that focused on the old Dutch houses of New York state. In that introduction he wrote,

The genesis of my interest in *Dutch Houses in the Hudson Valley before 1776* lies in the destruction of a delightful old house in Dutchess County ... when I was a small boy; for, many years later, in searching vainly for some photograph or drawing of that house, I came to realize that such dwellings of the colonial period in New York as had stood until the twentieth century were fast disappearing before the march of modern civilization...⁵⁰

His interest in preservation extended beyond the Hudson Valley. As an expression of his reverence for president/architect Thomas Jefferson, FDR supported the

⁴⁸ "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dutch Colonial Architecture," 433.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 431.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 433.

preservation of Monticello from 1925 through his presidency.⁵¹ In a Fourth of July address at Monticello in 1936 the President acknowledged that, “more than any historic home in America, Monticello appeals to me as an expression of the personality of its builder. In the design, not of the whole alone, but of every room, of every part of every room... there speaks ready capacity for detail and, above all, creative genius.”⁵² Later in his life, he urged Phi Beta Kappa chapter members at the University of Georgia to “preserve the houses of nationally important historical figures, citing particularly the Georgia home of Alexander Stephens.”⁵³⁵⁴

Similar to the reach of his preservation interests, Roosevelt’s architectural passions spanned way beyond the Hudson Valley. There was the cottage in Warm Springs (Figure 14), a swimming pool at Campobello, and even government buildings in Washington, DC that were designed in part by Roosevelt. In 1917, while in his position as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Roosevelt had the opportunity to oversee the construction of the newly expanded Naval Building on the Washington Mall.⁵⁵ While in the office of President, Roosevelt directed the expansion of the Executive Office Building, whose staff had doubled since Herbert Hoover’s administration. FDR played an active role in the initial design, helmed by Lorenzo Winslow, even going so far as to take credit for some of the design choices he found especially pleasing.⁵⁶

⁵¹ “Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Architecture of Warm Springs,” 71.

⁵² *Ibid*, 71.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 71.

⁵⁴ Alexander H. Stephens was an American politician who most notably served as the Vice President of the Confederate States of America under President Jefferson Davis during the American Civil War.

⁵⁵ “Franklin D. Roosevelt and Washington Architecture, 107.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

Yet, no architectural projects were more personal or indicative of FDR's passions and needs than those he undertook in Hyde Park and the greater Hudson Valley. His involvement in these projects ranged from supervisory to decision-maker, yet in each case he left a personal mark. In 1924, he chaired the Taconic State Park Commission under Governor Al Smith, seeking to create a parkway through the Hudson River Valley to the state capitol. According to a historical account of the planning process, Roosevelt decided that the focus of the parkway "was to be strictly recreational in nature. The route of the parkway avoided towns and villages, and like the earlier section, incorporated parks in its design."⁵⁷ This focus on the natural rings true to our understanding of Roosevelt's fondness for the scenic area in which he was raised. The report continues,

Roosevelt selected a route that would take motorists through a high, narrow ridge bounded by the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains to the west, and by the Berkshire Mountains to the east. Unlike [Robert] Moses, whose parkways encouraged the motorist to remain focused on the right-of-way, Roosevelt incorporated the sweeping landscape of rugged mountains and family farms into the design of the northern Taconic.⁵⁸

Roosevelt's engagement with the Taconic Parkway project did not end with the route, however. In the words of Kathleen LeFrank, who authored the National Register Nomination for the parkway,

Although not a landscape architect or engineer, he fought for the route he had laid out in 1924, and that's pretty much where the parkway went. He was also influential in the designs on the buildings, bridges and their material – even though he himself did not design them. Bear

⁵⁷ NYC Roads, "Taconic State Parkway Historic Overview," accessed 24 March 2013, available: <<http://www.nycroads.com/roads/taconic/>>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

in mind that much of it was built after he was governor and president (and even after his death), yet the commission stayed true to the parkway idea that [FDR] had laid out in the 1920s.⁵⁹

His projects in the Hudson Valley did not slow once he took the oath of office. A series of six New Deal Era post offices that were constructed in the Hudson Valley bore what the *Ellenville Journal* referred to as “FDR’s stamp.”⁶⁰ According to a scholar on these buildings,

President Roosevelt determined the unique Dutch Colonial architectural style of the post offices in Beacon, Wappingers Falls, Poughkeepsie, Hyde Park, Rhinebeck, and Ellenville, asking that a historic building in each locale be used as a model. The building material had to be fieldstone, salvaged from the area wherever possible. The stone should be laid up in a simple vernacular format. The murals in the lobbies received the same meticulous attention. The president helped select the subject matter, reviewed the artists’ sketches as the work progressed, and made corrections as he saw fit.⁶¹

Roosevelt considered these locations to be an extension of his home and treated the buildings accordingly. His concern with and time dedicated to these buildings in the midst of one of the United States’ most severe financial crises further exemplifies Roosevelt’s intense commitment to architecture and design.

Two of these post offices, namely the ones in Rhinebeck and Hyde Park, seem to further acknowledge Roosevelt’s participation in their design. Contemporary government buildings almost always featured stairs leading to the entrance, perhaps lending to a feeling of monumentality. In fact, in an era long before modern accessibility laws and standards, one may be hard-pressed to find other federal

⁵⁹ Kathleen LaFrank, personal email to the author, 29 January 2013.

⁶⁰ Bernice L. Thomas, *The Stamp of FDR* (Purple Mountain Press: Fleischmanns, New York 2002), 7.

⁶¹ Thomas, 7.

structures that did not feature stairs leading to the entrance. There are no barriers to entry at the Rhinebeck and Hyde Park locations. (Figures 15 and 16) While there is no documentation that specifically states Roosevelt's intention to make these two locations handicap-accessible, it makes sense that he would want to be able to personally enter the two post offices located in closest proximity to his Hyde Park estate. Roosevelt always planned to return to the area and had he not died while still in office, it is likely that he would have visited the post offices on occasion well into his retirement. In contrast, FDR's post offices located further from his home, that he would not frequent on a regular basis, such as that at Poughkeepsie, have stairs. This kind of structural clue, then, visible in the Hyde Park and Rhinebeck post offices, is one example of how scholars and visitors alike could glean some of Roosevelt's innermost concerns through architectural form.

Yet, for all the time he spent off-site, no ventures into architecture spoke more directly to Roosevelt's personality than the projects he undertook on the Hyde Park estate. His efforts in helping to design and build the renovated Springwood and Val-Kill cottage surely speak to his passion for architecture, in general. But it was his leading role in the planning and construction of both Top Cottage and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, buildings that were inherently *his*, that might offer visitors a clearer understanding of the ways in which Roosevelt used architecture to accommodate both his aesthetic desires and his physical needs.

Top Cottage, completed in 1938, was the president's private retreat. With initial drawings completed by Roosevelt and the assistance of architect Henry J. Toombs, who was listed on the plans as the associate architect, Top Cottage was the

first and only building that Roosevelt designed just for himself. While he lived in Springwood after its renovation, it was really his mother's home; though he might visit the post office, it was a public building. Even the cottage in Warm Springs was designed to accommodate multiple persons. One of America's first barrier-free buildings, Top Cottage also highlights Roosevelt's choice to construct a building around which he could move with little-to-no assistance.⁶² His efforts in constructing this cottage are a testament not only to his architectural skill and understanding, but also to his determination to overcome his hardships and remain an independent man.

Early sketches of the structure indicate that Roosevelt had always had a humble design in mind for his retreat, with a large porch and an open living space. (Figure 17) His original concept did have to change slightly, though. In Roosevelt's own words, the original plan had grown,

First into a large terrace and large living room which could be used in colder weather; thence into a plan for a small cottage, and finally, into the adopted plan of a wide porch, a living room, two bedrooms and a bath, and a wing large enough for a pantry, kitchen and double bedroom. This was called for in order to have someone take care of the place and prevent theft, etc. I did not personally expect to occupy the bedrooms but thought that they could be used by the children in case any of them wished to move there for a holiday or for the summer.⁶³

In any case, the concept for his main living space and wide porch remained constant; those bedrooms he never planned to personally use were placed in a wing adjacent

⁶² John G. Waite Associates, *The President as Architect* (Mount Ida Press: New York 2001): 15.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 19.

to the living area while there was attic space on top of both wings.⁶⁴ A general description of the building as it was constructed is as follows:

The house is symmetrical in massing, with a large central block facing west and with north and south wings set back toward the east. The central block is three bays wide by two bays deep, and measures approximately 40 feet 4 inches wide by 23 feet 9 inches deep, while the two wings are two bays wide by two bays deep... An open porch extends fully across the west façade of the central block. A smaller, enclosed porch is attached to the north elevation of the north wing.⁶⁵

As per Roosevelt's original intention, the building had a very simple design, common to the other such structures in the area. Upon its completion, besides its "new-ness" the building was meant to be indistinguishable from its local counterparts. A more final sketch, done by Roosevelt and Toombs displays the design they had agreed upon. (Figure 18) On May 5, 1938, Toombs sent a message to Marguerite LeHand, FDR's private secretary: "My dear Missy, I think It would be fun to title the drawings for the President's little house - "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Architect, Henry J. Toombs, Associate"."⁶⁶ Missy concurred.

Judging from his general interests in preserving and reproducing vernacular architecture and design, Roosevelt clearly chose to build the cottage according to Dutch Colonial precedents, evident on buildings scattered through the Hudson Valley. This decision is important in that it recognizes an important piece of Roosevelt's personality: he was a historian, who personally felt it important to

⁶⁴ The attic space was converted into additional bedrooms after Roosevelt's death, while the property was used primarily by his son, Elliott. One might assume that Roosevelt allowed for the potential of additional space in his original design because he knew his children might want to use the home with their families one day.

⁶⁵ Waite, 76.

⁶⁶ Henry J. Toombs, "Henry Toombs Suggests FDR Should Be Listed As Architect for Top Cottage, With Reply," correspondence available via the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and online at <<http://www.disabilitymuseum.org/dhm/lib/detail.html?id=2029>>.

conserve the past. Unlike Jefferson, for example, Roosevelt had no interest in being experimental where design tropes were concerned. Yet there were elements of the Top Cottage design that, upon reflection, were particularly innovative where accessibility was concerned.

When requests for proposals were sent to contractors, the detail in the construction specifications drawn up by the two architects further alluded to the President's perfectionist nature where his buildings were concerned. Many of the specifications alerted the future builder to the necessity of constructing this cottage in the means and with the materials by which the original Dutch Hudson Valley cottages had been built. Others were strangely specific, such as the placement of the power outlet that is mentioned in the Top Cottage tour.⁶⁷

The specifications that prove to be the most significant, however, are those that upon further inspection offered Roosevelt the ability to comfortably enjoy the property while confined to his wheelchair. Windows with low sills around the property play double duty: they both offered him un-obscured views while in a seated position *and* were common architecturally to Dutch Colonial homes. There were no steps to the main entrance to the first floor of the cottage; an earthen ramp provided access from the side of the porch. There were never saddles at doorway thresholds, meaning he could move smoothly between spaces. The sliding glass doors that allowed access to the porch also featured no raised barrier that might hinder his passage; the thresholds were also especially wide to accommodate his wheelchair. (Figure 19)

⁶⁷ While I have no specific source material for this story, it has been told to me on multiple occasions by guides and interpreters at the estate.

The open plan of the cottage and the accessible design provide a sharp contrast to the main home, Springwood, which featured dozens of stairs, narrow hallways, and a separated and cluttered floor plan. Roosevelt always claimed that Top Cottage was to be his calming retreat, away from the business that always enveloped Springwood. Yet, it is also likely that he just appreciated the building for its inherent ability to accommodate him on a much different level. It was quiet, surely, but the fact that he could easily move about there cannot be overlooked.

The final building that Roosevelt helped to design and construct on the Hyde Park estate was his own Presidential Library, the first of its kind. This building, like Top Cottage before it, followed many of the same structural patterns of Dutch Colonial architecture, from the stone façade to the porch and steeply pitched roof. Roosevelt completed the first sketches for the building in 1937, though it would not be open for another four years. (Figure 20) The Library set a precedent in the creation of future presidential libraries to come, but it also featured some accessible architecture features, previously used in Top Cottage, that were novel in public buildings at the time.

Because he planned to personally visit the collections of papers stored in the Library, the storage area aisles were wider than average in order to accommodate his wheelchair. The building also similarly features an open floor plan, allowing for easy flow from space to space, and no barriers of entry to the front door. While the designs found in the Library aren't so different from those found in Top Cottage, they have an entirely different connotation since the library was, from its inception, meant to be a public building. While Roosevelt was concerned with his own mobility,

he also set an early precedent for public buildings that would be accessible to anyone who wished to enter. The fact that the building was ADA compliant decades before ADA compliance ever existed makes the structure additionally significant. This means that the Library (and Top Cottage) have never had to alter their structure in order to accommodate the needs of visitors to a public site.

Few Americans are aware of the reach of Franklin Roosevelt's architectural contributions. His aesthetics and planning affected structures in locations as varied as Campobello, Warm Springs, and Washington, DC. In Hyde Park especially, between the Post Office and the four houses on the estate that he personally designed, his impact on the built environment cannot be overlooked. To be unaware of Roosevelt's architectural contributions on a national level is an unfortunate consequence of Roosevelt's more historically significant influences. However, paying very little mind to Roosevelt's architectural contributions on his own estate is inexcusable. The interpretation at the Roosevelt National Historic Site needs to be amended to include more information about Roosevelt's architectural interest, his relatively prolific catalog of buildings, and his innovative accessible designs.

V. Suggested Interpretation

In the twenty-first century, most historic house museums are finding themselves at the foot of two divergent paths. The first path, continuing with the status quo, increasingly leads these museums into obsolescence. The second path, which is to update and modernize interpretational strategies, allows the property to accommodate the interests and desires of a new generation of visitors and hopefully continue to educate and entertain visitors for many years to come. The Roosevelt estate is a unique case, as the home of one of our nation's most beloved leaders is unlikely to ever lose its draw. This fact does not, though, excuse the historic site from the need to continue to reinterpret and modernize its interpretation. At this turning point, one obvious way that the Roosevelt Estate can help itself moving forward is to focus on facts and themes that were not previously discussed on the site. As the general population's interest in architecture and disability becomes more apparent, the decision only becomes easier.

Knowing now how important architecture was to Roosevelt, both as a lifelong interest and as a means to accommodate his special needs, devising a way to impart this information to visitors at Hyde Park is essential. Franklin D. Roosevelt was a leader of the free world while also being confined to a wheelchair; accessibility was an enormous part of his life and his leadership. These facts must not only be mentioned, but also highlighted through the buildings on the estate. Various adjustments can be made to the ways in which architecture and how architecture related to Roosevelt's disability can be imparted to the public. These

recommendations fall into three categories: permanent installations, general marketing, and tour amendments.

First, now is the perfect time to consider addressing architecture and accessible architecture on the site at the Presidential Library, as the library is currently under construction for the first time since its opening. Within the Library, panels are set up throughout discussing different themes and areas of the Roosevelts lives, both at Hyde Park and around the world. For example, there is a section dedicated to Franklin's schooling. This seems an ideal format for introducing the idea of architecture to visitors.

Perhaps directly upon a visitor's entrance to the Library, a sign with photographs may greet them, indicating that Roosevelt designed this particular building, along with several others on the property and around the country. This placard can provide information about Roosevelt's lifelong interest in architecture and then the ways in which he set certain standards for accessible architecture following his illness. The Library, the sign may say, is the first example of a public building that was fully handicap accessible. *And* the Library was constructed nearly fifty years before the existence of modern ADA laws and regulations. This fact is one that should be celebrated.

There is one more library improvement that has already been planned and put into motion by the National Archives. The president's car, to which he had added hand pedals so that he could drive himself around the property, will be on display in the basement once it re-opens this summer following its renovations. According to Franceska Macsali-Urbin, the car will be on display with an adjacent interactive

touch screen that will allow visitors to see all of the unique features of the car.⁶⁸ These types of interactive exhibits are a perfect way to allow visitors to interact with the ways in which Roosevelt used innovation and design in order to improve his own quality of life.

The library cannot be the only place to mention Roosevelt's avocation with accessible architecture, as there is no assurance that all visitors will pay the relatively high admission fee to view its collections. There are also different printed materials and signage that the NPS may consider around the rest of the property so as to ensure that visitors are thinking about accessibility and architecture from their arrival. In the Wallace Center, for example, there are a number of standing displays that provide history of the family and the site. Perhaps there could be one display dedicated to the architecture on the site, specifically focusing on the buildings designed by Roosevelt, himself. There is also a video introduction to the family and the site that plays on loop in the Wallace Center. While reproducing a film is no easy task, a part of a five or ten-year plan could be to add a section into the film that deals specifically with Roosevelt's engagement with the field of architecture and how that can be seen on the site.

A simpler and more immediate solution would be the creation of a separate brochure to hand to visitors when they arrive on site. Along with the current brochures, which discuss the history of the site and the history of the Roosevelt family in a broad manner, this brochure could focus specifically on Dutch Colonial vernacular architecture, Roosevelt and architecture, and the architecture and

⁶⁸ Franceska Macsali-Urbin, personal email to the author, 2 May 2013.

accessibility of different buildings on the site. There could also be a tour designed and given once or twice a day that would accompany this brochure. This tour would specifically discuss the Roosevelt-designed architecture around the estate. Other sites such as Taliesin, The tenement Museum, and even Monticello offer themed tours and after hours tours that draw crowds who desire a more in-depth explanation of the site.

The Roosevelt Estate at Hyde Park can also use more aggressive marketing as a way to promote both the Dutch Colonial style of architecture and the accessible architecture on its site. Along with the brochure mentioned earlier, the site also would need to update its website to include a page dedicated solely to the discussion and introduction of vernacular architecture of the Hudson Valley, Roosevelt's history as an amateur architect, and the types of accessible architecture found on the site. If visitors are able to read about Roosevelt's lifelong interest in architecture before actually visiting the site, they are more likely to be engaged in those types of discussions or ask architecture-specific questions when they visit the site themselves.

Another means by which the site can better market its own accessible architecture would be to host different types of educational events. Complying with ADA has been a struggle of many historic homes over the past twenty years. Top Cottage and the Roosevelt Library have a unique perspective on this matter as they are buildings that were designed to be accessible long before the legal requirements. Perhaps the site could host a lecture series that deals specifically with accessible architecture around the country or the difficulties of converting old homes to be

accessible. Further, they could play host to speakers who are fluent in the vernacular architecture of Dutchess County who can speak to the designs that Roosevelt himself was attempting to emulate.

Perhaps the most important suggestion, however, is for the guides to speak to the themes of architecture and accessibility during the tours themselves. The following suggestions for the site's tour guides have been devised in order to fit into the site's current interpretational strategy; more specifically, they will be written as key topics or short stories associated with particular locations that can be used in the more relaxed, conversational manner that is favored by the NPS tour guides.

1. When leading the group past the Library at the start of the tour, mention that it is the nation's first presidential library and that Roosevelt himself conceived of the idea and designed the building. This is the perfect opportunity to introduce Roosevelt as an architect, while also pointing out the use of Dutch Colonial architectural styling. Recommend to the group that they keep an eye out for this vernacular style as the tour continues.
2. In front of Springwood, when discussing the history of the home, be sure to discuss specifically Roosevelt's role in the 1915 redesign. Note the aesthetic differences between the main buildings and the wings. Point out that while the center is Georgian in design, the wings have the Hudson Valley stone of which Roosevelt was so fond. Connect this to Sara's domineering demeanor, but note that Franklin was able to compromise with her so that they could both enjoy the final product.
3. When on Springwood's main floor, point out how cluttered each room is and how narrow the hallways are. Ask the visitors to imagine trying to maneuver through the home while in a wheelchair. Try to foster a discussion about the various accessibility issues in the home. Be sure to remind them about the stairs leading to the entrance. Ask them to remain conscious of these issues when touring the second floor, as well. This can lead to the story about the manual elevator.
4. During the drive to Top Cottage, efforts should be made to point out buildings along the way that are similar to the Dutch Colonial architecture that is present on the site. It can be noted here that Roosevelt himself was not only a fan of the style, but also recognized the importance of retaining these

historic styles in the area, which is why he chose to use that typology in the buildings he designed.

5. While pulling up to Top Cottage, attention to be called to the front of the house and the grading of the land. Compare it to the front of Springwood, recalling the many steps, and note how much easier it would have been for Roosevelt to enter this property while in his wheelchair.
6. While entering the house, talk about Roosevelt's varied architectural endeavors, including the cottage in Warm Springs, the post offices, the other buildings on the site, and even federal buildings in Washington, DC. Ask the visitors to consider the differences between designing public buildings, buildings for his family members, and then a personal cottage for himself.
7. While in the living room at Top Cottage, note the open floor plan, the low windows, and the lack of barriers between rooms. Introduce the building's heritage as one of the first fully accessible buildings in the United States. Note that while these designs all seem extremely obvious today, at the time they were relatively innovative and were devised by Roosevelt himself to accommodate his needs.
8. While seated on the porch of Top Cottage, as is done currently for open discussion, prompt the visitor to reflect and discuss the different methods of accessibility apparent in the cottage and how they might compare to the layout of Springwood.

It is also worth considering reviving the driving tour that gave visitors insight into the town of Hyde Park and also showed one of the six post offices that Roosevelt designed. This addition would help to establish the fact that Roosevelt's architectural designs had impacts beyond his own estate. While it might seem that anyone could design his own house, it takes someone with more interest, drive, and talent to be able to influence the planning of buildings off site. Because Roosevelt had the interest and the drive, in addition to being the President of the United States, he was able to accomplish an architectural legacy that no other amateur architect could ever have dreamed.

The talking points listed above do not need to be scripted, nor do each of them need to be mentioned on every tour. Tour guides would not need to adopt any new processes in order to introduce this information to the visitors. This relatively simple adjustment, however, would have a profound impact on the ways in which visitors relate to both the site and to Franklin Roosevelt. By introducing a new narrative that focuses on his hobbies, his interests, and his paralysis visitors would leave the tour with a newfound appreciation for the simultaneously classic and innovative architecture that exists on the grounds.

Each of these suggested items can be implemented on its own, allowing for the site to make improvements on its own timeline. None of these requires a complete overhaul of current interpretational strategies. Rather, the plan recommends ways in which the site can build upon its current process, allowing for even more information about Roosevelt and his family, which will enhance the visitor experience. As visitors become more interested in architecture and Roosevelt's disability, introducing these interpretational methods will only help to keep the site's message timely as we continue to move through the 21st century. Perhaps most importantly, the site will finally recognize the lasting legacy that Roosevelt himself left on his family's estate. He personally shaped his built environment and created a location that was meant to be visited by tourists for many years to come.

VI. Conclusion

Having established the fact that architecture and its uses played a pivotal role in Roosevelt's life, both on and off the Hyde Park property, it is necessary now to define how the site's managers can best interpret the buildings to acknowledge their significance. Interpreters should no longer try to hide behind the assertion that the general public isn't interested in architecture. If one assumes that those visiting Hyde Park are interested in the life of the 32nd president, it should also be assumed that those people would be interested in an endeavor that occupied much of his time. If framed correctly, any seemingly academic discussion can be made palatable to a broad audience.

Rather than focusing on esoteric architectural terminology, interpretation should focus on broad architectural themes and issues that affected FDR's day-to-day existence on the site. Areas such as Roosevelt's lifelong interest in the subject, Roosevelt's hands-on approach to design, vernacular Dutch Colonial buildings, and accessibility can be introduced to visitors while the focus remains squarely on Roosevelt himself. Similar to the way in which Monticello, a project to which he devoted much of his life, is an extension of Thomas Jefferson, it can be argued that Springwood, Top Cottage, and the Library are extensions of Roosevelt. While they may not, on their own, attain the same architectural significance as Monticello, their importance as relates to the president who shaped them remains constant.

One of the inherent luxuries of the site not having any specific interpretational script is its flexibility. The introduction of these architectural themes would be relatively simple. Merely introducing these themes to the guides

and making them familiar with both Roosevelt's history of architectural interest as well as the ways in which he realized these interests on the site, could lead to a new narrative. Simply adding another few sections to the "Tour Stories" document, for example, would be one possible action. On top of that relatively easy change, some permanent Library installations and targeted marketing to highlight the site's architecture will also improve the site's overall interpretational value.

Interpretations and interpretive styles are constantly evolving. According to Ms. Boyce, when the site first opened the tour guides were men and women who had actually worked for the Roosevelts. They were able to relate firsthand accounts of life on the site, but did not necessarily bring any pertinent historical insight to their narratives. As interpretation "came of age" in the eighties and nineties, and as more material about the Roosevelts was published, interpretation on the site shifted to accommodate the newly available facts. Knowing that interpretation would rarely remain in stasis for more than a decade or two, and is always a moving target, it is only logical for a new interpretive narrative to be introduced on the site.

As the "inventor" of the formal Presidential Library, Roosevelt was clearly invested in preserving his life for future generations. He was adamant that visitors have access to his letters and files, both professional and personal, so that his projects and ideals might continue posthumously. His passion for architecture was always a public one that has since become sidelined in favor of focusing on his revolutionary presidential policy. His disability, and the way in which he managed it, was always a relatively private matter that has since been publicized in the wake of

the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).⁶⁹ The ability to interpret both of these items through the built fabric of his permanent home is an incredible opportunity that should not be missed.

Focusing more heavily on architecture would potentially introduce visitors to a set of facts they had not known previously. It is unclear how many Americans currently know about Roosevelt's architectural interests, but surely discussing the subject in greater depth on the site would lead to more universal acknowledgement of this part of his life. Further, while most Americans now know that Roosevelt was the United States' first and only disabled president, few are likely aware of the steps he took – architecturally and beyond – to overcome the adversity of his circumstances in order to continue the independent life he so desired. Including these items in the overall interpretation of the Hyde Park estate will foster a greater understanding, both academically and personally, between the site's visitors and FDR.

⁶⁹ Roosevelt also could not have possibly believed that his affliction with polio and subsequent paralysis would not eventually be common knowledge; if for no other reason, the fact that he founded The March of Dimes in order to combat and find a cure for polio was a surefire indicator that he had a personal connection to the illness.

VII. Images



Figure 1: Statue at FDR Memorial in Washington, DC © Rachel Smith, About.com Guide

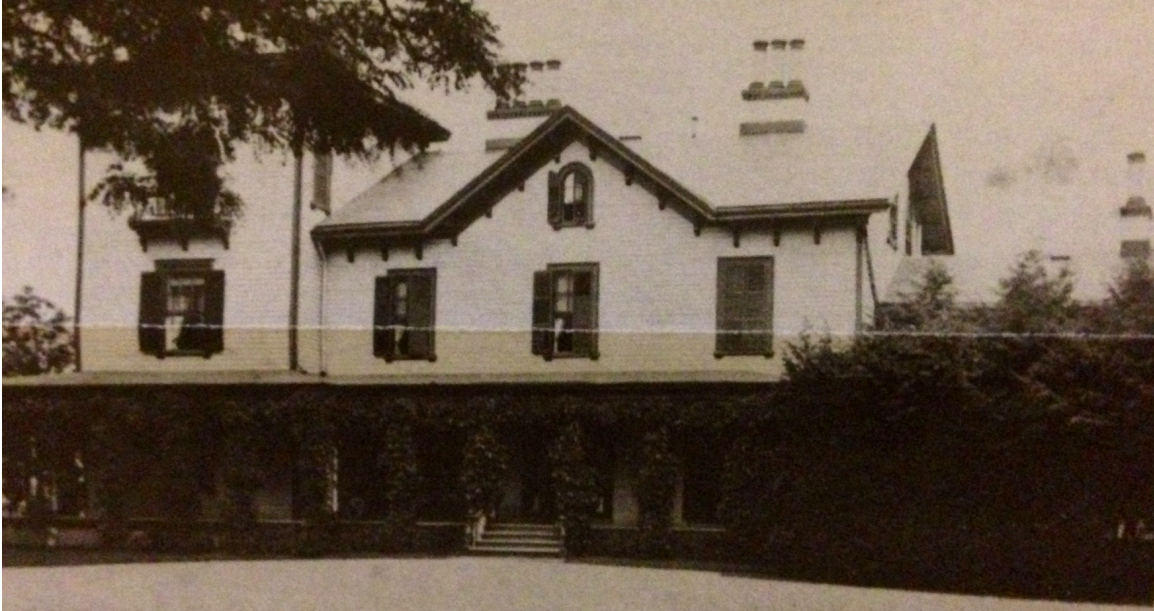


Figure 2: Springwood circa 1890, courtesy of the National Archives



Figure 3: Springwood, 2012 © Amanda Mullens



Figure 4: Top Cottage, 2012 © Amanda Mullens



Figure 5: FDR Presidential Library and Museum, courtesy of the National Archives

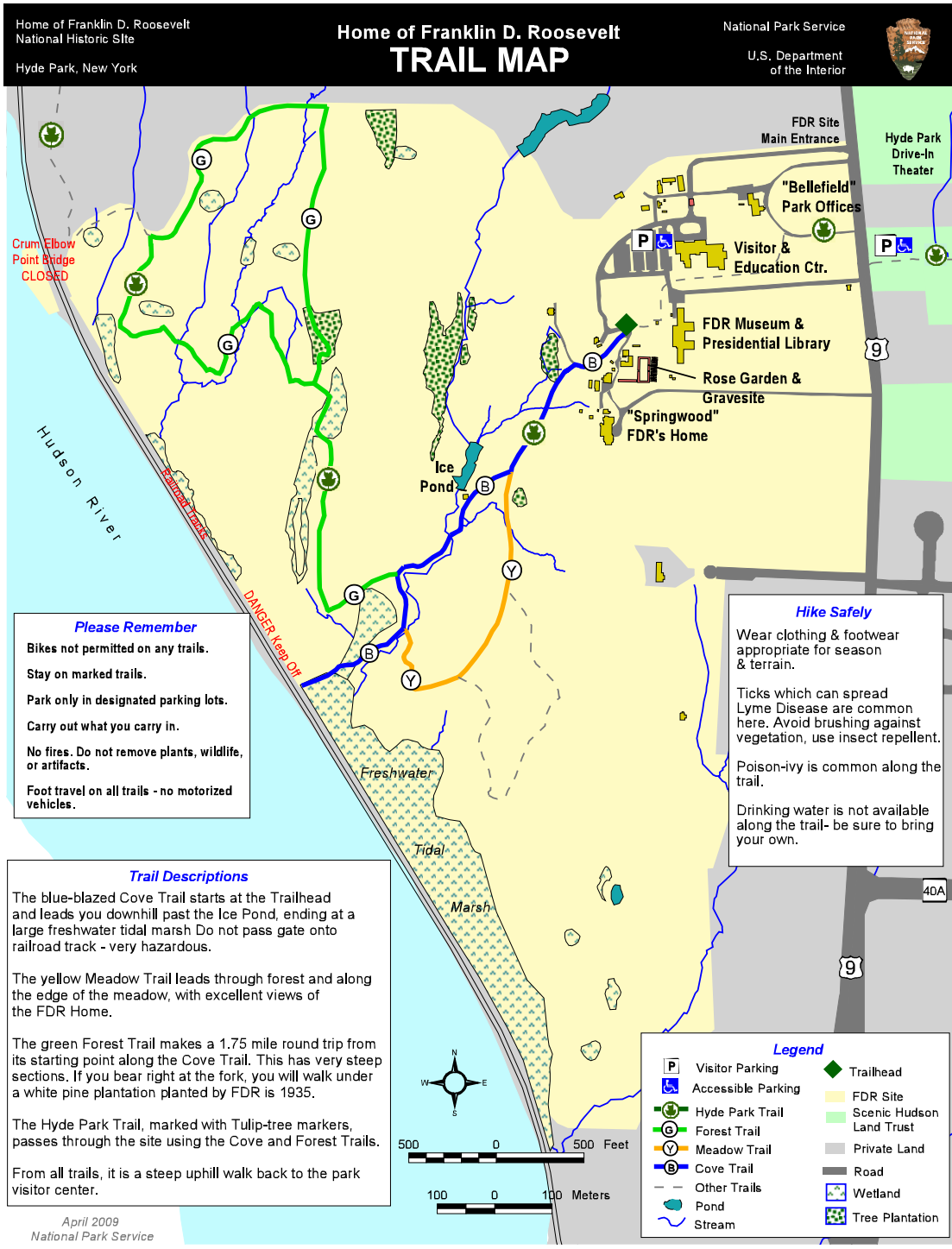


Figure 6: Map of the Hyde Park Estate, courtesy of the National Park Service.



Figure 7: Map of estate along with Top Cottage and Val-Kill, courtesy of the National Park Service



Figure 8: Wallace Visitor Center, 2012, © Amanda Mullens



Figure 9: Wallace Center mosaic map of property, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library



Figure 10: FDR's grave, 2012, © Amanda Mullens



Figure 11: Springwood's non-electric elevator, 2012, © Amanda Mullens



Figure 12: Top Cottage interior, 2012, © Amanda Mullens



Figure 13: Tour on Top Cottage porch, 2012, © Amanda Mullens



Figure 14: Roosevelt's cottage at Warm Springs, "Little White House," courtesy of the National Park Service



Figure 15: Hyde Park post office, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library



Figure 16: Rhinebeck post office, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

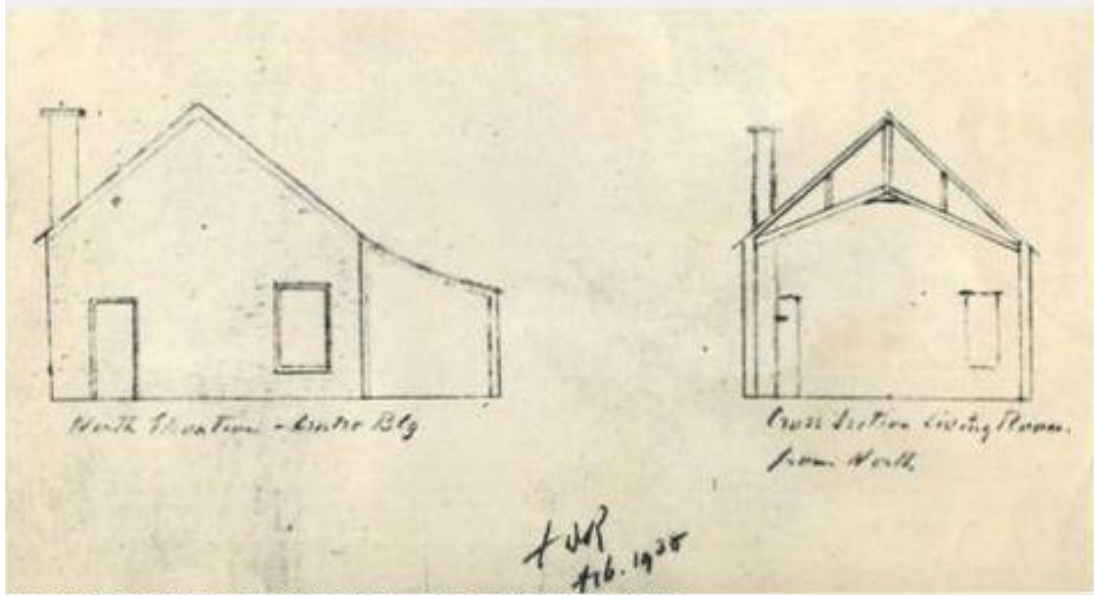


Figure 17: Preliminary sketch of Top Cottage by FDR, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

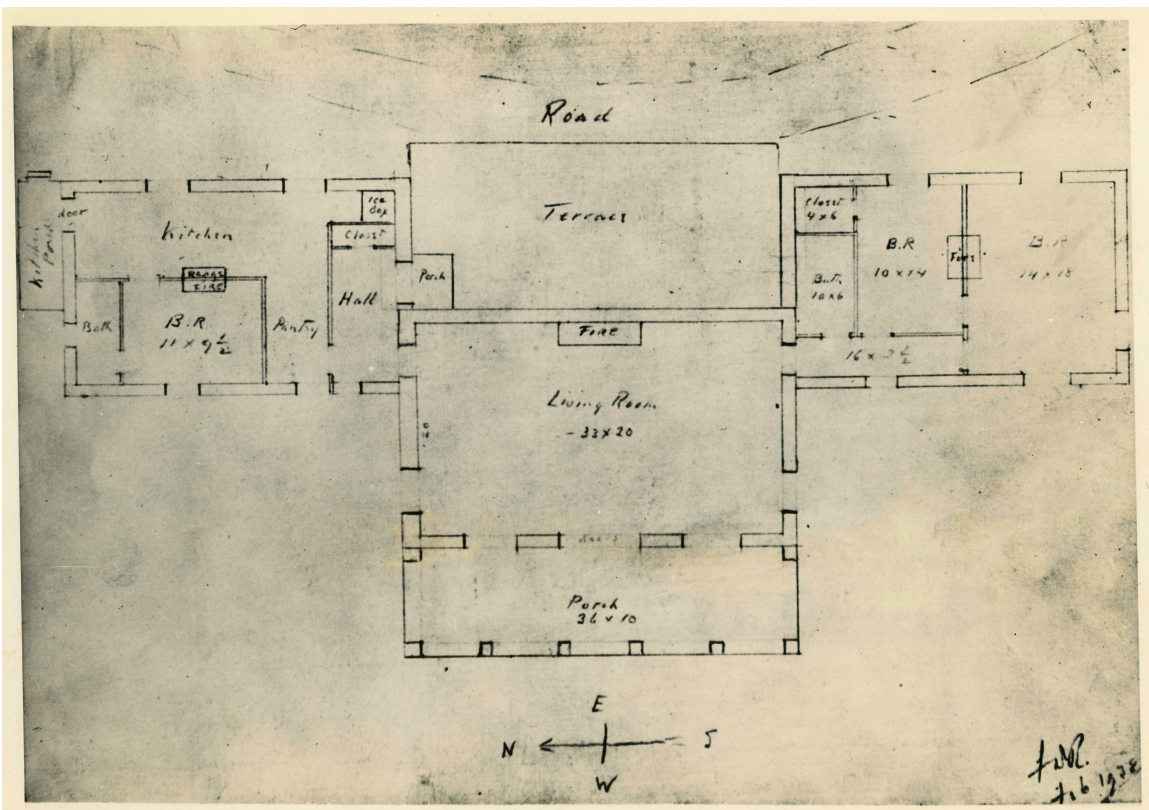


Figure 18: Later sketch of Top Cottage by FDR and Henry Toombs, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library



Figure 19: Interior of Top Cottage, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

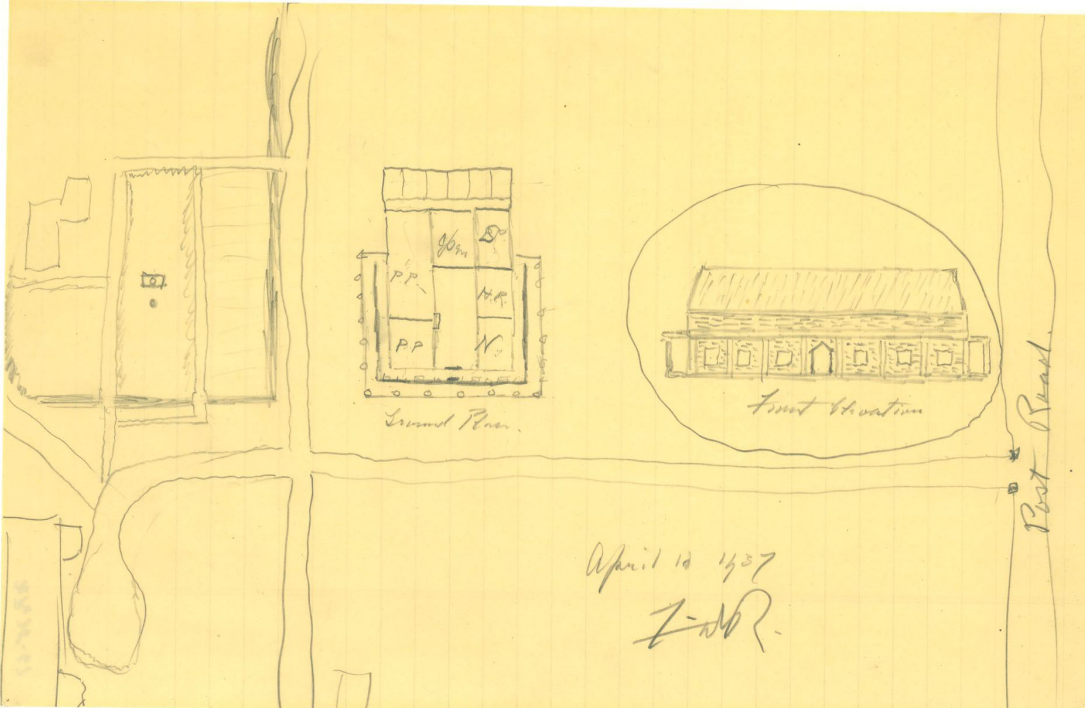


Figure 20: Roosevelt's original pencil sketch of the Library, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

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