

Top Cottage

Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt
National Historic Site
Hyde Park, New York

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



"I began talking about building a small place to go to escape the mob."
Franklin D. Roosevelt



Daisy Suckley with Fala on the porch at Top Cottage.

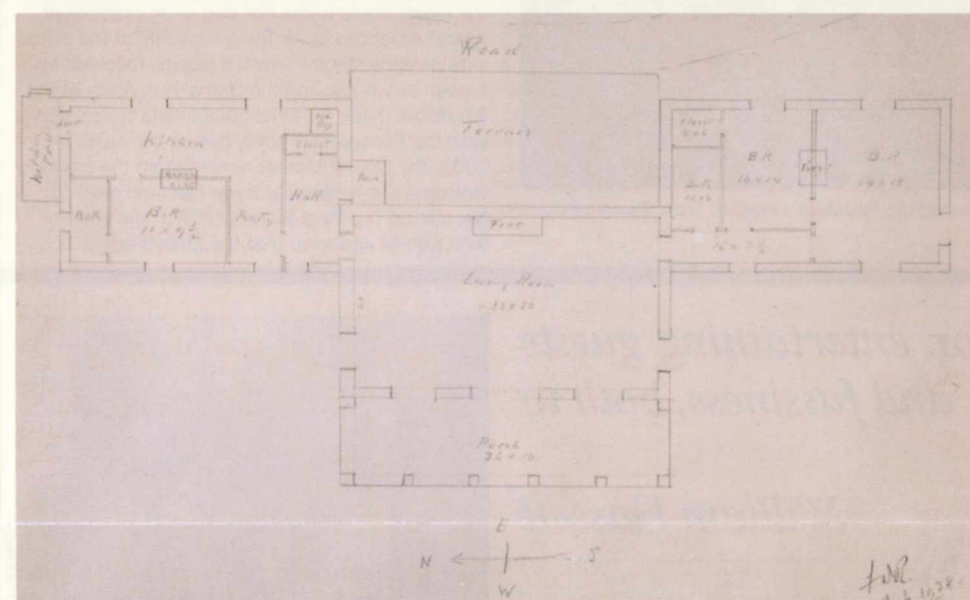


FDR in a characteristically relaxed moment at Top Cottage.

became close friends. A Dutchess County neighbor, Daisy also frequently accompanied FDR on country drives and came to love Dutchess Hill as much as the President, writing in one letter to FDR, "I have come to the very definite conclusion that OUR HILL is, quite without exception, the nicest Hill in Dutchess County."

At first, in 1935, FDR thought a simple shelter with fireplace and kitchenette would suffice, but soon he changed his mind. Daisy suggested a log cabin, but FDR thought this out of character for the Hudson Valley. "No," he disagreed, "I think a one-story fieldstone, two room house...one with very thick walls...and a little porch on the west side." By 1937, they were exchanging sketches, suggesting variations and details to complete FDR's vision. "I've spent ages on the plans," Daisy wrote. In another letter she confessed that she had plans in her bag for a Dutch house, "surrounded by trees and distance and peace and a glow of an open fire."

Roosevelt's fondness for his Hudson Valley roots and Dutch heritage repeatedly influenced architectural projects he undertook in Dutchess County, including the expansion of Springwood in 1915, the construction of a cottage at Val-Kill in 1925, his Presidential Library and Museum in 1939, and a number of local schools and post offices. Top Cottage was clad in native fieldstone from old stone walls on the property, had divided-light double hung sash windows, and a broad gabled roof that curved down to cover a west-facing porch. "I am having no lawn" he wrote in 1938, "and keeping the woods in their natural state." He and Daisy variously referred to it as the Cottage on Dutchess Hill, the Hilltop Cottage or Top Cottage.



FDR's sketch of the floor plan for Top Cottage.

"Roosevelt truly loved to build, and had persistent interest in the details of building."
Henry Toombs



FDR shows Top Cottage to New York City Mayor LaGuardia and Congresswoman Caroline O'Day.

A President's Retreat

Franklin Roosevelt loved the forested ridge known as Dutchess Hill from boyhood. As a child, he explored these woods east of his home on horseback. As an adult, he relished long drives through his woodlots and up the steep farm road in his hand-operated car. These were rare moments of physical independence—an opportunity to elude his security detail and immerse himself in the native countryside. In short, Dutchess Hill is where the President went to relax, to think, and to recall fond memories of youth.

Early in his presidency, FDR imagined a refuge from the demands of the office. Although in times past he had found peace in the Hyde Park house where

he was born, it became increasingly difficult for him to find solitude there. He later recalled, "it was almost impossible to have any time to myself in the big house. The trips were intended primarily for a holiday—a chance to read, to sort my books, and to make plans for roads, tree planting etc. This was seemingly impossible because of: (a) visitors in the house, (b) telephone, (c) visits from Dutchess County neighbors, (d) visits from various people who, knowing I was going to be in Hyde Park, thought it an opportune time to seek some interview. Therefore, I began talking about building a small place to go to escape the mob."

FDR began plans for such a place on Dutchess Hill with his distant cousin Margaret "Daisy" Suckley. She started spending time with FDR in 1922 while he was recuperating from polio. They eventually

Building the Cottage

FDR met architect Henry Toombs when he was hired to design a cottage at Val-Kill in the mid-1920s. Toombs and FDR became friends collaborating on numerous projects including the cottage and furniture shop at Val-Kill, a public library for Hyde Park, and the Little White House at Warm Springs, Georgia. "Roosevelt truly loved to build," Toombs recalled, "and had persistent interest in the details of building."

FDR made numerous preliminary sketches of Top Cottage himself and directed Toombs throughout the design process. The finished plan included a

central block (the living room and porch) flanked by a service wing on the north, and bedrooms on the south. The primary rooms were all on the ground floor. Later, caretakers rooms and additional rooms for family and guests were added in the attic spaces. The west porch opened to views of the valley below and mountains beyond.

When construction began in 1938, FDR issued statements to the press about his house on Dutchess Hill. Some licensed architects expressed outrage that FDR was billed as architect of a building when he had no license in the field, and more incensed when published plans were labelled, "Franklin D. Roosevelt, Architect; Henry J. Toombs, Associate." FDR intended to spend no more than

\$16,000 on the house, making numerous changes to remain within budget. The final cost came to \$16,599.

In response to this highly publicized personal project of President Roosevelt, a wave of advice and offers of gifts and assistance poured in from the public. Hundreds of letters from school children, architects, designers, manufacturers, and ordinary citizens represented the intimacy with which the American people addressed their president.

Other than Thomas Jefferson, who began building his retreat Poplar Forest in 1806, no other president undertook an architectural project like Top Cottage while in office.

"It is important, of course, that the entrance hall, porch and terrace be on the same level on account of the wheelchair."

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Accommodating FDR's Wheelchair

In 1921, Franklin Roosevelt contracted polio. The resulting paralysis left him mobile only with great effort and the support of leg braces, or with the use of a wheelchair. To varying degrees, all the residences FDR designed or renovated for his or his family's use after 1921 necessarily accommodated his disability. The cottage has no steps to the first floor, or thresholds to limit the use of the wheelchair among the rooms or onto the wide west porch. Low windows provide views for host and guests seated inside. The mirror was installed just over the bathroom sink so that it could be used by a seated person. On the north end of the porch,

an earth berm was built to provide a natural ramp off the back terrace. Through his collaboration with FDR, Henry Toombs is the first architect in the United States to spend a significant portion of his career designing buildings for wheelchair users.

The design of Top Cottage expressed FDR's determination, to live as independently as possible. FDR demonstrated in his own life that people like himself could live full and productive lives and he sought to make it possible for others to do so as well. He supported expanding government aid to persons with disabilities through the 1935 Social Security Act, and created the polio rehabilitation center in Warm Springs, Georgia, and the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis in 1937.



FDR, Fala and Ruthie Bie at Top Cottage.



View from Top Cottage.



Interior of Top Cottage today.

"It would be difficult to imagine a more representative cross section of American democracy than was to be found among the relatives, friends, and neighbors of the Roosevelts who received invitations to the picnic."

New York Times, 1939



Mrs. Henry Morgenthau, King George VI, Herbert Lehman and the President's mother, Sara Roosevelt on the west porch during the June 11, 1939 picnic luncheon.

The Royal Picnic

Roosevelt built Top Cottage during his second term in office and used it throughout the rest of his presidency to entertain close friends and associates. World leaders joined him to discuss foreign policy issues in the cottage's informal, intimate setting. The first royals to visit Top Cottage were the Crown Prince and Princess of Norway in April 1939. Soon after, King George II of Greece was a guest.

The most publicized visit to the cottage was in June 1939 when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth of Great Britain made an unprecedented visit to the United States to strengthen ties between the two governments on the eve of World War II. Roosevelt hosted the British royals at Top Cottage with a picnic luncheon, making headline news though the press was not in attendance. The menu included traditional foods such as smoked turkey and Virginia ham, but the press focused (many with disapproval) on Roosevelt's decision to introduce the royal couple to the hot dog as an example of typical American food. The informality of the picnic with its wide range of invited guests, followed by a swim at Val-Kill, and the formal hospitality at the Big House made for a memorable and typical visit with the Roosevelts. Shortly before her death in 2002, the Queen Mother remembered the warm welcome she received at Hyde Park and recalled her ride up Dutchess Hill with FDR at the wheel with humor and relief that she arrived safely.



Guests on the west lawn for the June 11, 1939 picnic luncheon in honor of the royal visit to Hyde Park.



Winston Churchill (left), Mrs. Averill Harriman and FDR (right) at Top Cottage.

A World in Crisis

The modest architecture and setting of Top Cottage belie its significance as a gathering place for world leaders, royalty, and Roosevelt administration officials during a period of intense international crisis. The visits of the British monarchs just prior to the outbreak of World War II, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Britain during the war, and members of other European royal families—some representing governments in exile—illustrate the significance of Top Cottage in international affairs.

FDR's well-documented personal style of governing softened distinctions between official state business and social entertainments. Members of the President's cabinet, members of congress, U.S.

ambassadors, military officers, governors, mayors, and leaders of religious institutions, as well as secretaries, advisors and friends, frequented Top Cottage.

Other notable guests to Top Cottage included Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Crown Princess Louise of Sweden, Queen Wilhelmina and Princess Juliana of the Netherlands, King George II of Greece, and Prime Minister MacKenzie King of Canada. Often no record of these conversations exists because of the unofficial nature of these occasions.

The years FDR used Top Cottage were among the most tumultuous of his life. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, "My husband planned this cottage for his own personal pleasure and relaxation. He never used it except for a few hours at a time when he

wanted a peaceful spot to write a speech or to sit and talk with his friends. Sometimes he would choose to have a picnic meal there. But more often he wanted quiet in order to think."



Top Cottage today.

"The boss has a knack for entertaining guests with a minimum of strain and fussiness, both to him and to them."

William Hassett

A Personal Place

In his retirement, FDR expected to spend time at Top Cottage sorting his papers and collections, and writing his memoirs, local history, U.S. naval history, and even fiction—possibly detective stories. As it happened, he remained in office and used the cottage for many daytime visits between 1939 and his death in the Spring of 1945. On the porch, he indulged his longtime love of birding, or shared a picnic. On his way to and from the cottage, he might pause to inspect his tree plantations, visit his tenant farmers or see the dogwood in bloom.

But most of all, Top Cottage provided FDR a place to relax and "escape the mob," as he had desired. Daisy's diary entry for May 19, 1944 conveys a sense of the peace he found there: "About 11:30 A.M. the P. came, suggested we go to the Top

Cottage, instead of his coming into the Library, to see the dogwood. We put a couple of chairs in the sun, north of the porch, & just talked, quietly, about the view, the dogwood, a little about the coming invasion in Europe."

Top Cottage reflects FDR's sociability, and the easy blend of personal and public life characteristic of both him and Eleanor Roosevelt, which flourished at their Hyde Park retreats. As host, he loved making toast on a table in front of the fireplace. He took great pleasure serving the toast to his guests himself. Daisy wrote of Top Cottage after FDR's death, "Such happy hours have been spent there by FDR—relaxed and peaceful; sometimes with one person, or two, or three, or even 6 or 8—but always people with whom he did not have to make an effort—who did not demand anything of him, and always loved every little joke..."



FDR with Fala in the Living Room at Top Cottage.



Eleanor Roosevelt at Top Cottage.

"This love of simple surroundings—a bright fire, always a cluttered room of books, papers, a few ship models & odds & ends, sometimes a curious but seldom a really fine thing, formed the unstudied background he liked to live in."

Henry Toombs



Margaret Hambley, King George II of Greece, the Crown Princess Martha of Norway, and FDR on the porch at Top Cottage.

About Your Visit

Top Cottage is owned and managed by the National Park Service as part of the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site. Following FDR's death in 1945, the cottage was in private hands for over fifty years. The Open Space Institute purchased the property in 1997 and the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute managed the cottage's restoration and raised funds to carry it out. In 2000, the Open Space Institute turned the property over to the NPS and the site was opened to the public. Reproduction furnishings encourage visitors to experience the cottage as FDR used it. Furnishing continues through the efforts of the Roosevelt Institute, the National Park Service, and private donations.

The National Park Service offers programs at Top Cottage from May through October. Tickets are available at the Henry A. Wallace Visitor and Education Center located on the grounds of the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Presidential Library and Museum, Route 9, Hyde Park, New York. Access to the site is by shuttle bus ONLY which departs from the Wallace Center. The shuttle is wheelchair-accessible. PRIVATE VEHICLES ARE NOT PERMITTED AT TOP COTTAGE.

For advanced reservations and additional information, please call 845 229-5320.

Further information can be found on the National Park Service web site at www.nps.gov/hofr or see www.historichydepark.org.

Also visit Daisy Suckley's home, Wilderstein, located approximately 10 miles north of Hyde Park in Rhinebeck, New York. See www.wilderstein.org for more information.

Hyde Park Trail

By 1945 the Roosevelt estate stretched from the Hudson River on the west to Dutchess Hill on the east, comprising over 1500 acres. Today, public hiking trails trace the routes of Roosevelt farm and riding roads from the river, past the big house, through Val-Kill, past Christmas tree plantations laid out by FDR, and up the ridge to Top Cottage. The NPS invites you to hike to the cottage and rest on FDR's porch. Hikers wishing to attend scheduled programs at Top Cottage must purchase tickets at the Henry A. Wallace Visitor and Education Center.

