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HISTORIC STRUCTURE REPORT

SAGAMORE HILL

Part I

Prepared by

Helen MacLachlan
Museum Curator

Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace NHS

September 15, 1964

APPROVAL SHEET

RECOMMENDED

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Regional Director, Northeast Region

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Director

SAGAMORE HILL

Historical Data

Oyster Bay had been a part of Theodore Roosevelt's life from the time he was 15 years old. For some time his grandfather, Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt, had rented a summer place in the vicinity of Oyster Bay, and in 1873 TR's father decided to follow his father and rented, for his family, "Tranquillity". This house was said to have reminded Mr. Roosevelt of "Roswell", the home in Georgia where he had married Martha Bulloch. Tranquillity was some two miles southwest of what was later to become "Sagamore Hill", TR's home from 1885 to 1919. TR's mother kept Tranquillity even after her husband's death in 1878, and it was not given up until after her death in February 1884.

The young Theodore had married Alice Lee at Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, on October 27, 1880. Following the wedding the bride and groom went to Tranquillity for two weeks -- remaining long enough for TR to vote for Garfield - his first vote for a President.

During these happy days in Oyster Bay TR knew that he wanted to own a home in this vicinity. He began negotiations for property which he knew he wanted to own as early as November 1880. He finally acquired the acreage

in August 1883 from Thomas Youngs. There were approximately 155 acres; 28 he sold to his sister Bamie, and 32 he sold to Mrs. James King Gracie, his mother's sister Annie Bulloch who had lived with TR's mother during the Civil War days at 28 East 20th Street, New York City. TR wrote his sister Bamie, August 25, 1883:

> Darling Bysie:
>
> Last Wednesday I went down to Oyster Bay, hoping the survey would be finished; but it was not. Next week it will be done, and I shall then, as you directed, have your property mapped out, with monuments, making it continuous and adjacent to mine. I paid ten thousand dollars down and gave a mortgage for the remaining twenty thousand at five per cent interest. Your land will cost about $7,500; of this you will need to pay $2,500 down while the remaining $5,000 you can either pay down at once, thus clearing your property of all encumbrances forthwith, or else keep it as part of the mortgage, paying 5 per cent interest a year, and the principal whenever you feel inclined, or have saved enough. These details can be arranged in October - but as regards the $2,500, you had best write at once to Uncle Jim, and tell him to turn it over to me, as I have already paid the ten thousand, and will need the money as soon as is convenient.

Plans for a "lodge and stable" had already been drawn up by Lamb & Rich, soon to become Rich and Lorenz. The cost of the lodge and stable was to be $5,160. Unexpectedly on February 13, 1884, TR's wife, Alice Lee, died. By March 1, 1884, TR had come to the realization that he must have a home for his baby daughter Alice. His sister Bamie had agreed to be responsible for the care of the baby and also agreed to oversee the building of the house. TR signed the contract for the house at a cost of $16,975. John A.

Wood and Son were the carpenters. It had been planned that the house would be on the crest of the hill with a fine view in every direction, but especially to the north and west. TR wanted to be able to sit on a spacious porch and watch the sunset and the boats on Long Island Sound. The house was to have been called "Leeholm" but after Alice's death, it was decided to name it "Sagamore Hill" after the old Sagamore Mohannis, who as chief of the little local Indian tribe had signed away his rights to the land two and a half centuries before.

By the summer of 1885 the house was completed, and Bamie had moved in; TR came east from his ranch in Dakota Territory. He spent about eight weeks in the east between June 24 and August 22. He moved for the first time into his new home. He seemed to feel that if his sister lived in the house during the summers, he would be free to stay at her house at 422 Madison Avenue, New York City, in the winters. The brother and sister both felt it was wiser to have it on a visiting basis rather than on a home together basis. (Illustration #1)

Sagamore Hill was a Victorian structure of frame and red brick with gables, dormers, verandahs and even some colored glass. There were 23 rooms, eight fireplaces and 95 acres. Most important to TR at this time was that he had a place for his game heads.

It was TR's hope that his sister should entertain

extensively there -- both her friends and his friends. He pointed out that he was spending little money in the west and could very well afford to help with the expenses. There were gay parties -- house-parties and hunt breakfasts. It was thought that the house would not be much used in the cold winters as it was rather a drafty place, later to be spoken of in the winter as "the birdcage".(Illustration #2)

In November 1886 TR sailed for England to marry Edith Kermit Carow, a friend from childhood. They were married at St. George's in Hanover Square, London on December 2nd. Theodore and Edith travelled about the continent for over three months, and in late March of 1887 returned to Sagamore Hill. Shortly before sailing for home TR had written Bamie that Edith and he thought they might not be able to afford to keep Sagamore Hill. However, they never had to give up Sagamore Hill, and from that time on there were never dull days there. Three of their children were born at Sagamore Hill and two were born in Washington.

Many interesting and exciting events kept Theodore and Edith leaving Sagamore to live in other houses -- temporarily always -- for they knew Sagamore Hill was their home. The family lived in Washington during TR's Civil Service years and during his time as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Mrs. Roosevelt and the children always returned to Sagamore during the summer even though TR had to

remain in Washington's heat. Then came the Spanish War and the Rough Rider days. The family stayed at Sagamore Hill to await anxiously the return of the Colonel of the Rough Riders. (Illustration #3)

From that time on it was a strenuous life. TR was elected Governor of New York State that fall, and the family moved to Albany on December 30, 1898. The next move was back to Washington in March 1901, when TR became Vice President of the United States. As usual the family returned to Sagamore for the summer. Suddenly, on September 14, 1901, TR became the President of the United States. Again the family moved into another temporary home -- for almost 8 years this time. Sagamore Hill then became the Summer White House for 7 summers. (Illustration #4)

Needless to say, with a growing and energetic family, changes had to be made from time to time in the Sagamore Hill house. By 1904 the President realized he needed a larger room and a dignified one in which to receive the groups of delegates and distinguished visitors who were coming constantly to Sagamore Hill. He asked his long-time friend, C. Grant LaFarge, a well-known architect, to plan such a room. He wanted the room to be attached to the house at the north end of the wide hall. Plans were made by LaFarge, and on January 27, 1905, TR wrote from the White House to Mr. LaFarge:

> Edith has shown me your letter. In the first place about the windows. We do not want transoms or windows that open in or out. We

want windows that open up and down with outside blinds. We are a little doubtful whether the skylight is advisable...Now, about the woods. Before settling on this I wish we could have some figures on the cost. As you know, we were very much nonplussed at the figures. Judging from the amount the Lodges paid for their extension, we had not expected that the figures would be anything like as large. Would it be possible to have some other man, who might do the work cheaper, figure on them. How about that Oyster Bay builder, Mailer? Our idea is to have the room done as cheaply as possible, and as nearly as possible in the style of the rest of the house. If we could afford it, of course we would like to have it handsome; but we cannot afford it, and therefore we can only have as much beauty as is compatible with building cheaply a room of the necessary size. Our idea was to have the floor of cheap hardwood, the ceiling of cheap wood, the walls with linen paper and finished in oak or similar wood like we have in the rest of the house. Now, if you think it would not be incongruous, and if the cost of the whole thing is not too expensive, then we could put in the four pillars with the wood back of them, and finish the fireplace with wood over it. But before agreeing to purchase Tindalo wood and the mahogany log for these purposes, I think we ought to have an idea of what the whole expense will be. Then we can see whether we can afford to purchase these handsome woods even for this limited amount of work. Would having the four pillars and the wood back of them, and the wood above the fireplace, of handsome woods look incongruous? We love your plan with the bay window and with the pillars as a feature, and the big fireplace, but we feel we ought to know something as to what the cost will be before we commit ourselves to the expensive woods. Would it do to make the pillars of plain wood? Always yours, (1)

The room, 40x30 feet, was about completed by the fall of 1905. Joining the room to the north side of the house meant taking away a prominent entrance there and placing it from the west side of the hall to the porch. (Illustration #8 and #9)

(1) The room was built at Sagamore Hill as originally conceived by La Farge.

The room was built 2 steps down from the hall to a landing, and 2 more steps down to the room from each end of the landing. Built entirely of American and Philippine wood, the room with a high ceiling is a monochrome of luminous soft red-brown. The mantelpiece is of carmagon wood -- mahogany -- from the Philippines, the ceiling of American swamp cypress and hazel. The black walnut columns, set in pairs against all four walls, heighten the dignity of the room.

On July 18, 1905, the President wrote Henry Cabot Lodge:

> ....I am thoroughly enjoying Oyster Bay, and I want to show you the north room, which Grant La Farge made. We think it delightful...

(Illustration #10,#11,#12,#13)

The original porch had extended from the port-cochere on the south side, across the west side where it widened to about 18 to 20 feet, then continued around the north side, stopping short of the door that was on the north side of the house until the addition of the new room. (Illustration #4). The section from the port-cochere to the west side of the porch was without a roof, as it still is. The west and north side porch had a shingled roof. From the west porch there were four wide steps, facing slightly southwest, down to the lawn. These steps are seen in illustration #1 showing the house when it was completed in 1885; at this time not a tree, not a vine and not a shrub are seen. The steps are shown in an 1898 photograph (illustration #3).

Apparently at the time the north room was built the steps were removed as were two sections of the porch railing extending from the corner of the roofless portion of the porch to the post where the steps had been previously.(Illustration #9) As the President was receiving constantly large groups and delegations, and often spoke to them from this verandah, this would seem to be the logical reason for these changes.

If photographs are correctly dated, the steps do not reappear after late 1905 until the fall of 1960, seven years after the Theodore Roosevelt Association had opened Sagamore Hill as a national shrine. The steps and the two sections of railing were replaced for the safety of the visitors who like to sit awhile on the porch. This work was done in the autumn of 1960 by Joseph Mahr of Syosset. (Illustration #18)

When the north room was added, as has been previously stated, the door on the north side of the house was placed facing the west opening onto the end of the porch on the north side of the house. A small porch was built at a right angle to the north side porch facing west and extending to the north room south wall; steps were added there. It was with the addition of the north room in 1905 that it became feasible to add the "step-up" bathroom off of TR's dressing-room as well as the balcony off of the bathroom, facing west. (Illustration #15)

During the time the Theodore Roosevelt Association was restoring Sagamore Hill to the period of the Presidential years -- the Association purchased Sagamore Hill in 1949 and opened it to the public as a national shrine in 1953-- changes were made in various parts of the house to help circulation of visitors. The narrow hall that leads to the kitchen was straightened; the lift (dumbwaiter) was removed and the stairs to the cellar from the kitchen were removed in conjunction with this alteration. In this same area the stairway from outside the kitchen door to this hall was changed from a narrow spiral stairway to a stairway with two landings to care for the curve. The steps were widened as well.

The room on the east of the kitchen, formerly a laundry, was made an office for the curator. The small porch off the kitchen on the north was enclosed and made into a service kitchen; steps from this to the outside face east. There was a porch on the east side of the former laundry which had been added by the Roosevelt family sometime about or soon after 1905. Mr. Archibald B. Roosevelt thinks this change was made because of changes in the driveway when the north room was added.

There were changes in the room on the second floor known as Alice's room and in the adjoining hall during the TR Association's restoration.

Because of using the third floor rooms as exhibit areas one entirely new stairway was built from the second to the

third floor on the northwest side of the house. This was needed for better traffic circulation. The stairway from the second to the third floor on the southeast side of the house was widened. Louvres were added on the north and south sides of the attic when a large fan was installed. Shutters on the third floor windows were removed after 1953 at different periods. (Illustration 18) (1)

(1) All of the changes made after 1949 by the TR Association are shown in the Master Plan for the Preservation and Use of Sagamore Hill National Historic Site. Page G9, Lamb and Rich plans, and page G17, Chapman, Evans and Delehanty plans show the variations.

Illustration #1

1885 - first photograph of Sagamore Hill; no planting; steps and railing on west porch.

Ice-house is visible at back of house - east side.



Illustration #2

1885 Meadowbrook Hunt Club hounds; no planting shown as yet.

Note small center libraty window to the right of the port-cochere. This window was made into a so-called picture window by Mrs. Roosevelt when TR was Governor, probably in 1900. The term picture-window was not in current usage at that time.



Illustration #3

1898 One of a series of Sagamore Hill pictures in the October 1, 1898, The Mail and Express Illustrated Saturday Magazine. These were pictures made at the time of the Oyster Bay Reception given Colonel Roosevelt on his return with the Rough Riders.

Note steps and railing seen on west porch.



Illustration #4

1900 North side of Sagamore Hill before the addition of the north room.

Note doorway on north side - later to disappear - and note that the porch on the north side of house exits to the steps shown at the doorway.



Illustration #5

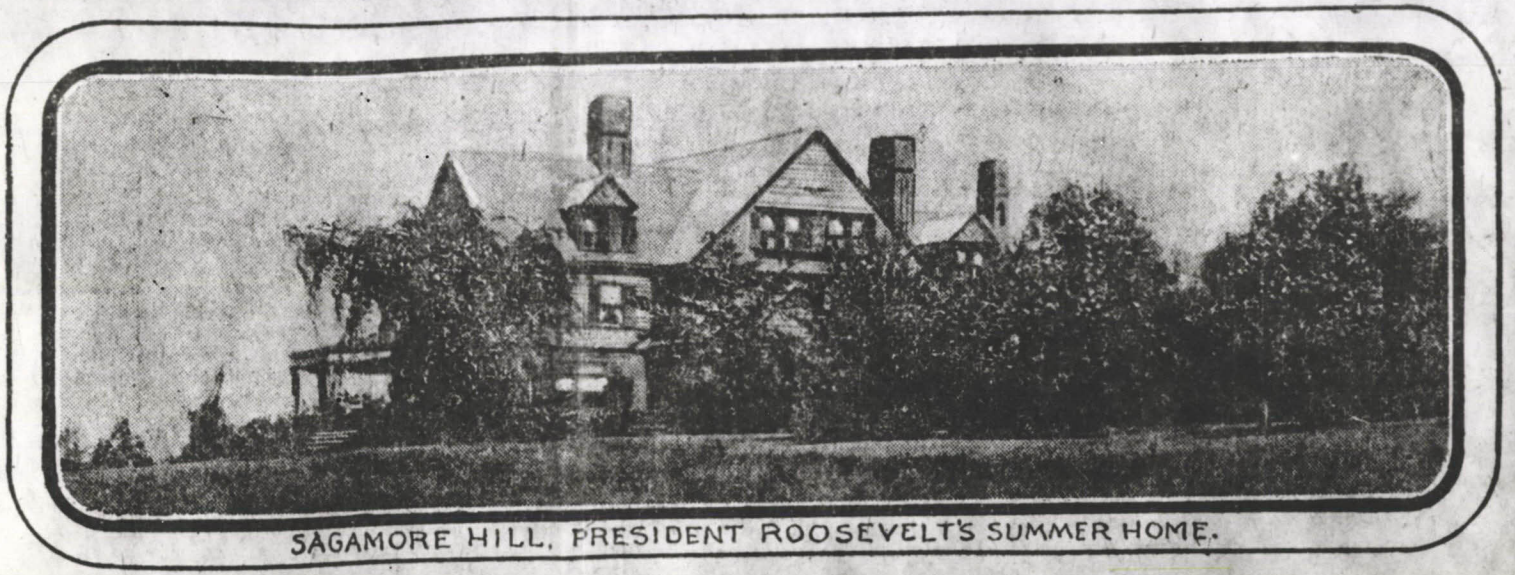
1904 Sagamore Hill, President Roosevelt's Summer Home.

So said the Sun, July 10, 1904.

Steps still shown on the west porch.

THE SUN, SUNDAY, JULY 10, 1904.

WHEN THE PRESIDENT IS



SAGAMORE HILL, PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT'S SUMMER HOME.

Illustration #6

1904 Showing outside of the enlarged library window.

This window was enlarged about 1900 when TR was Governor, according to Mr. Archibald B. Roosevelt. The original window shown in Illustration #2 was but a high small window.

Mrs. Roosevelt called it "the picture window".



Illustration #7

1905 This shows the inside of the enlarged library window with TR at his desk.



Illustrations #8 and #9

1905 These two pictures of Sagamore Hill were published in the October 1905 Current Literature.

#8 (upper picture) shows the steps and railing still on the west porch.

#9 (lower picture) shows all of the north room area under construction, including the new part of porch by the south end of the north room, the little balcony built out above this end of the north room, from TR's step-up bathroom. The steps and railing have been removed from the west porch. These do not reappear until 1960.

Current Literature commented under #9, "A residence as conspicuous in current history as Vargin was in the plenitude of Bismarck's power or San Souci in the time of Frederick the Great."





Illustration #10

1905 North Room -
Photographed in the autumn after completion; no shades in window - sparsely furnished. No firebench as yet.



Illustration #11

1907 Looking north into the north room. Note ceiling structure and pillars. Fire-bench shown at fireplace; it was a Christmas present to TR from his sister, Mrs. Wm. Sheffield Cowles, in 1906.



Illustration #12

1907 North room looking west and south; bay window shown. In the left distance the front door is visible on south side of the house.



Illustration #13

1907 North room showing part of landing and two steps down to room.

We know it is before 1910 as the elephant tusks, presented to TR by the Emperor Menelik of Abyssinia, in that year are not shown at the south end of the north room by the landing. Menelik was the grandfather of Haile Selassie.



Illustration #14

1907 The direct view of the west side of Sagamore Hill. It shows north room, porch and port cochere. The railing and steps are not there.



Illustration #15

1907 Shows full length of north room, addition of steps at porch extended to the north room south wall at a right angle to North porch. Shows balcony built off the "step-up" bathroom, built in 1905 when the north room was added.



Illustration #16

1953 Photograph taken at the time the Theodore Roosevelt Association was ready to dedicate Sagamore Hill as a national shrine.

Railing and steps on west porch had not yet been replaced.

A good close-up of the bay window in the north room.



Illustration #17

1959 The Theodore Roosevelt Association had not added the railing and steps on the west porch as yet.

Some of the third floor shutters have been removed.

Note the storm door which has always been a part of the house in winter.



Illustration #18

1960 - in the fall the big elm tree at the southwest corner of the porch had been removed and the next tree had not yet been planted.

Note that the railing and steps on the west porch have reappeared - the first time since early 1905.

The louvres in the attic were added to the north and south side at this time. The south side one is shown.

Shutters on the third floor have been removed.

