

# Vanderbilt Mansion

Official Map and Guide

National Historic Site  
Hyde Park, New York

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

By their grand scale, classical ornament, and look of permanence, the majestic homes of the late 19th century call to mind those of the European upper classes from times past. These were the dwellings of Americans who made fortunes from industry. Devoted at first to amassing large sums, the new millionaires eventually found that money was no longer enough. They wanted to live as though they were heirs to centuries of wealth, to leave a lasting tribute to their achievements. The era when such a way of life was possible ended early in this century. Frederick Vanderbilt's mansion, along with its counterparts in Newport, Palm Beach, or elsewhere along the Hudson, can transport us briefly to an elegant world long past.

Frederick William Vanderbilt was the grandson of Cornelius "Commodore" Vanderbilt and the son of William Henry Vanderbilt—both the richest men in America in their time. The Vanderbilts redefined what it meant to be wealthy. "Up to this time," wrote social observer Ward McAllister, "for one to be worth a million of dollars was to

be rated as a man of fortune." By the 1880s, "fortune" connoted "ten millions, fifty millions, one hundred millions, and the necessities and luxuries followed suit."

How did the richest family in America spend money? Yachting, horse breeding, and racing automobiles became family avocations. They attended opera, attired in top hats and tiaras, and collected art. They gave to worthy causes, married European titles. Every one of William Henry's eight children eventually owned a mansion on Fifth Avenue as well as several "cottages" in the country or by the sea. With their grandfather's millions, the younger Vanderbilts gained admission to drawing rooms and ballrooms where the Commodore himself would have been unwelcome.

Along with his father's fortune, William Henry inherited the mixed blessing of fame for himself and his descendants. Their births, marriages, divorces, business doings, philanthropies, and scandals made for lively newspaper copy from

the 1880s well into the 20th century. "Thank God for the Vanderbilts," a society columnist wrote. "The Vanderbilt family can always be relied upon in times of dullness to furnish either news or a sensation of some kind."

Publicity-shy Frederick Vanderbilt managed to escape such scrutiny. Still, he spent his inheritance in the manner of his siblings, surrounding himself with the best that money could buy. He bought Hyde Park, as the property was known, in 1895. Like their wealthy neighbors, Frederick and his wife, Louise, were probably attracted to the east bank of the Hudson by the beauty of the Hudson Valley and quick access to New York City on the Vanderbilts' own New York Central Railroad. Previous owners had made the estate famous for its landscape. The variety of trees and plants certainly appealed to Frederick's love of nature. Shortly after the Vanderbilts acquired the 600-acre estate, the *New York Times* described it as "the finest place on the Hudson between New York and Albany."



Frederick and Louise Vanderbilt

Like most of the prominent Hudson River families, the Vanderbilts used their retreat only for a few weeks in spring and fall, and for an occasional weekend in winter. They spent summers at Newport or cruising on their yacht, and the winter social season at their New York City townhouse. A staff of 60 or so, drawn mostly from local farm families, maintained the house and grounds year-round. After Louise Vanderbilt died in 1926, Frederick lived out his days here amid his trees and gardens. Louise's niece Margaret Van Alen inherited the estate upon Frederick's death in 1938; the next year she told President Franklin Roosevelt she wished to "keep my place as it is—a memorial to Uncle Fred and a national monument."

Since 1940 the 211 acres Margaret Van Alen donated to the federal government has been open to the public. Except for some of the owners' belongings, the mansion and its contents remain unchanged from the time the Vanderbilts lived here, as if their country retreat were ready for a weekend visit.

## The Vanderbilts of Hyde Park

"An unassuming philanthropist," wrote *Time* magazine about Frederick Vanderbilt in his obituary, one of the few press accounts of the millionaire, "he possessed the twin talents of most Vanderbilts for railroading and yachting." A biographer described him as "a thoroughly good fellow, entirely devoid of any snobbishness or nonsense." Frederick William Vanderbilt was born at the family's Staten Island farm in 1856. Upon graduation from Yale with a degree from the Sheffield Scientific School, he joined the family business, acquainting himself with every department of the railroads.

In 1878 Frederick married Louise Anthony Torrance, 12 years his senior and recently divorced from one of his cousins. Though they married against the wishes of his parents, Louise Vanderbilt in time became one of William Henry's favorites.

Louise Vanderbilt was at home in New York society. Frederick's name was usually absent from the columns that chronicled his relatives, but his tastes were similar to others who lived in this rarified world. Besides a Fifth Avenue townhouse, the Vanderbilts owned a private railroad car, yachts, automobiles, and homes in



Frederick Vanderbilt's 1933 Cadillac

Bar Harbor, Newport, and the Adirondacks, as well as in Hyde Park. The Hyde Park property was, by all accounts, their favorite.

Louise delighted in entertaining at their Hudson River estate. Visitors arrived by boat or rail—the estate had its own dock and station—or by private car. There were several guest chambers in the mansion and additional guest rooms in the Pavilion. Thirteen rooms on the third floor housed visiting ladies' maids. For entertainment, the Vanderbilts would drive friends around the grounds and countryside, or arrange golf and tennis at neighboring estates. Meals were prepared in the basement kitchen and sent up to the dining room on the dumbwaiter. No matter the season, the dining room table was always adorned with flowers which Louise selected from her greenhouses or gardens. Formal dinners might be followed by an

evening of bridge or a dance held in the drawing room. On Saturday night, dancing was brought to a halt precisely at midnight in observance of the Sabbath. Frederick avoided social occasions when he could, preferring to slip away to his trees and gardens. A former butler remembers how his employer would meet the estate superintendent for an inspection of the grounds "and they would go off probably for hours, traveling around, way over into the woods. Oh yes, that was his pride . . . And the trees, of course."

Not all of the Vanderbilts' wealth went for lavish living. Many of the new aristocrats pursued their philanthropies as diligently as their pleasures. Beginning with the Commodore's million-dollar gift in 1873 to the Tennessee university that now bears his name, the Vanderbilt fortune underwrote opera houses, art galleries, muse-

ums, hospitals, libraries, and educational institutions. Frederick Vanderbilt gave generously to Yale University and other organizations. Louise Vanderbilt never tired of helping the community, particularly its young people. She established a reading room at St. James Chapel in Hyde Park and provided for the higher education of qualified young women. She was instrumental in bringing the Red Cross to town and in founding the District Health Nurse Service. Her principal charities outside Hyde Park were the St. Anthony's Home for Working Girls and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

By comparison with his brothers Cornelius II and William Kissam, Frederick Vanderbilt led a private life. His accomplishments, though, were impressive. He was the first in his family to graduate from college. He sat on the boards of 22 railroads—he was a director of the New York

Central for 61 years. Unlike any of his brothers or their children, he managed to increase the \$10 million inheritance he received at age 29 to \$70 million by the time he died. Finally, it was a lifelong source of pride that he turned a neglected estate on the Hudson into a place of beauty and scientific interest.



The Vanderbilts' yacht Vedette II

## The House of Vanderbilt

"I have been insane on the subject of money-making all my life," Cornelius Vanderbilt once admitted. He was born on Staten Island in 1794 into a family rich in the Dutch heritage of colonial New York but modest in means. His entrepreneurial talent emerged at age 16 when he began a ferry service to Manhattan. By the 1840s his steamship lines to ports all along the Atlantic coast placed him on a par with the most successful industrialists and earned him the name Commodore. Vanderbilt began buying up struggling railroads in the 1860s and making

them profitable. His trains ran on schedule and the service was good. His New York Central Railroad grew into the nation's biggest business by the 1870s. The hub of this network, which he expanded throughout the Northeast and to Chicago, was Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan.

Long after his death, the Commodore was described thus: "The largest employer of labor in the United States, he despised all routine office work; kept his figures in a vest-pocket book; ate

sparingly; never speculated in stocks; never refused to see a caller; rose early; read *Pilgrim's Progress* every year, and, for diversion, played whist and drove his trotters whenever he could." At his death in 1877 he had \$100 million. By leaving the bulk of his fortune to one heir, his son William Henry, he established a dynasty that promised to take the name and fortune to still greater heights.

Though he lacked the enthusiasm for the business wars his father thrived on, William Henry



Cornelius Vanderbilt's birthplace, Staten Island



Steamship Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1847



W. H. Vanderbilt family 1873; Frederick second from left. Background: Rail bond with Commodore's portrait

Vanderbilt died in 1885 with twice what he had inherited. In his will, he explained that \$200 million was too much for any individual. "There is no pleasure to be got out of it as an offset—no good of any kind." He was generous to all eight children, with the larger shares going to his two oldest sons who now managed the railroads. It was this generation who would elevate spending money to an art and who, with the exception of Frederick, would dissipate most of it in the process. The Commodore's dream of keeping the fortune intact died with the century.



Grand Central Terminal, 1872



## Monuments to New Wealth



Fifth Avenue in 1880s: William Henry Vanderbilt home, Shepherd/Sloan homes, William K. Vanderbilt "chateau"

Splendid mansions filled with things of the past implied a rich ancestral heritage for millionaires who lacked social credentials. For this they summoned the Beaux-Arts architects. Richard Morris Hunt, the standard-bearer of the era, was the first American to train at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Others, notably Charles Follen McKim, followed. Invoking a design vocabulary based on the classical principles of antiquity and the Renaissance, the Beaux-Arts men were avant-garde for their time.

No single family was more conspicuous as patrons of architecture than the Vanderbilts.

William Henry Vanderbilt initiated the family building campaign with a mansion at 640 Fifth Avenue, completed in 1880; he built its twin next door for two daughters. Soon the avenue was lined with the residences of the Commodore's grandchildren. William K. commissioned Hunt to build an 80-room "little Chateau de Blois" across the street from his father. A few blocks away, Cornelius II built a five-story, red brick palace also of French influence, "the largest dwelling-house occupied by a single family

in the city of New York." William K. gave his wife Alva the classic Marble House for her birthday in 1888. It was the most opulent of the summer cottages at Newport until 1895, when Cornelius built The Breakers, Hunt's version of a 16th-century Italian palace. Frederick began his Hyde Park country place the next year. Meanwhile, George Washington Vanderbilt, the youngest of the clan, surpassed everyone with his North Carolina retreat Biltmore, also by Hunt. It was—and still is—the most spectacular of the great Vanderbilt mansions.



Hyde Park mansion, architect's drawing

## Inside the Mansion: "A Demand for Style"

"Frederick William Vanderbilt of New-York," reported the *New York Times* in 1895, "who has recently joined the little colony of millionaires up the river, is getting ready to make extensive improvements on his house and grounds." When the Greek Revival house he had purchased proved structurally unsound, the Vanderbilts built a new house on the site. They moved into the mansion late in 1898, although European craftsmen did not complete the interior plastering and woodcarving until the next spring. The 50-room dwelling was designed by Charles Follen McKim of McKim, Mead, and White to evoke the ancestral home of a noble European line. The classical style and gleaming Indiana limestone facing belied the modern steel and concrete supports beneath. Everything was up-to-date, including the central heating, the plumbing, and the power supplied by a hydroelectric plant on the estate. It was also virtually fireproof, an important consideration since an earlier house on the site had been destroyed by fire. Just as the Vanderbilts had retained the services of the country's premier architectural firm to build their home, they sought the top

names to design its interior. The furnishings and decoration were more than double the cost of the house itself.

In the principal rooms of the first floor, the hand of Stanford White is as clear as if he had signed his name. The flamboyant partner of McKim, Mead and White influenced the house plan from its inception by furnishing a carved wooden dining room ceiling. To be incorporated as a whole, the ceiling must have dictated the proportions of that room and thus its opposite wing, the drawing room. White probably purchased the ceiling—along with the large Isphahan rug and stone chimney breasts in the dining room, the Renaissance chairs in the entrance hall, the marble columns in the drawing room, and assortment of tapestries—on one of his expeditions abroad. He searched Europe for relics which he shipped home. He was then prepared to supply clients with original works of art that lent authenticity to the background he was designing for them. In 1897 White traveled to London, Paris, Florence, Rome and Venice in search of articles for the mansion at

Hyde Park. Thus the antique pieces in the Vanderbilt Mansion are found almost exclusively in White's first floor rooms.

By the 1890s, the popular taste for overfurnished rooms with nondescript furniture and miscellaneous objects was on the decline. "After a period of eclecticism that has lasted long enough to make architects and decorators lose their traditional habits of design," wrote Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman in their 1892 volume *The Decoration of Houses*, "there has arisen a sudden demand for 'style'." Like their architect counterparts, these decorators sought to bring order out of chaos using the grammar of earlier decorative schemes to create rooms that were original but unified in style. It was a revolutionary concept.

The rooms designed by Georges Glænzner exhibit both schools. In Frederick Vanderbilt's bedroom antique twisted columns that flank the bed are brought together with the settee and side chairs of Spanish influence, the built-in bed and cabinet of no particular style, and the



contemporary desk and upholstered pieces. It was this disregard for a guiding design principle—this "delight in disorder"—that gave way to a more scholarly approach. The versatile Glænzner's Gold room is a textbook example of a "period room," where all of the furniture and ornaments follow the Rococo style of Louis XV. The tall case clock, a copy of one in the Louvre, was reproduced by Paul Sormani, one of the finest cabinetmakers in late 19th century Paris. Another room that appears to have been lifted bodily from 18th century France is Louise Vanderbilt's bedroom, by Ogden Codman. The commodes and writing desk came from Sormani's shop. His case pieces carry his name in delicate script on the locks of the drawers. The settee, daybed, and chairs are also reproductions, and the rug from the Savonnerie was made to fit this room.

The interiors of the Vanderbilt Mansion present a study of the dramatic change in interior design that occurred in the late 19th century. The contrast between old and new, as defined by the leading decorators of the day, is striking.



Entrance Hall



Parlor, west end



Gold Room



Dining Room



Frederick's Bedroom

## The Gentleman Farmer

The property Frederick Vanderbilt bought in 1895 had been neglected while the owners lived abroad, but was not so run down that Vanderbilt failed to see its attractions. He supervised the regrading, clearing, and replanting. On the 125 or so acres between the Hudson River and Albany Post Road, bridle trails wound through gentle hills of venerable trees and shrubbery. The restored Italian gardens descended in terraces toward Crum Elbow Creek. One of the first steel and concrete bridges in the country spanned the creek just below the newly created

pond. West of the house a lightly wooded slope met the river, revealing the expanse of the Hudson Valley and the mountains beyond. In 1905 Frederick purchased 64 acres to the north and nurtured the land into harmony with his English country park plan.

The gardener's cottage and tool house near the formal gardens survived from the earlier era. The Vanderbilts added the coach house, greenhouses, gatehouses, and a powerhouse. They built the Wales House and Howard Mansion for

friends. Across the Albany Post Road lay 475 more acres. Part was left to nature and the rest was cultivated. Vanderbilt was proud of winning prizes for flowers, produce, and livestock at the Dutchess County Fair; award money always went to the gardeners and farmhands. Frederick Vanderbilt planted a screen of white pines and hemlocks inside the stone wall along the road. Today the trees, grown very tall, shield the estate from modern intrusions. Visitors may stroll the grounds as the Vanderbilts' own guests might have done.



White Bridge



Pavilion



Coach House and Stable



## About Your Visit

Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site is part of the National Park System, one of more than 370 areas that are examples of the nation's natural and cultural heritage. The mansion is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. The grounds are open daily until sunset. Write: Superintendent, Roosevelt-Vanderbilt National Historic Sites, 4097 Albany Post Road, Hyde Park, NY 12538; call 845-229-9115; or visit [www.nps.gov/vama](http://www.nps.gov/vama). Also visit the National Park Service website at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).



Rose Garden