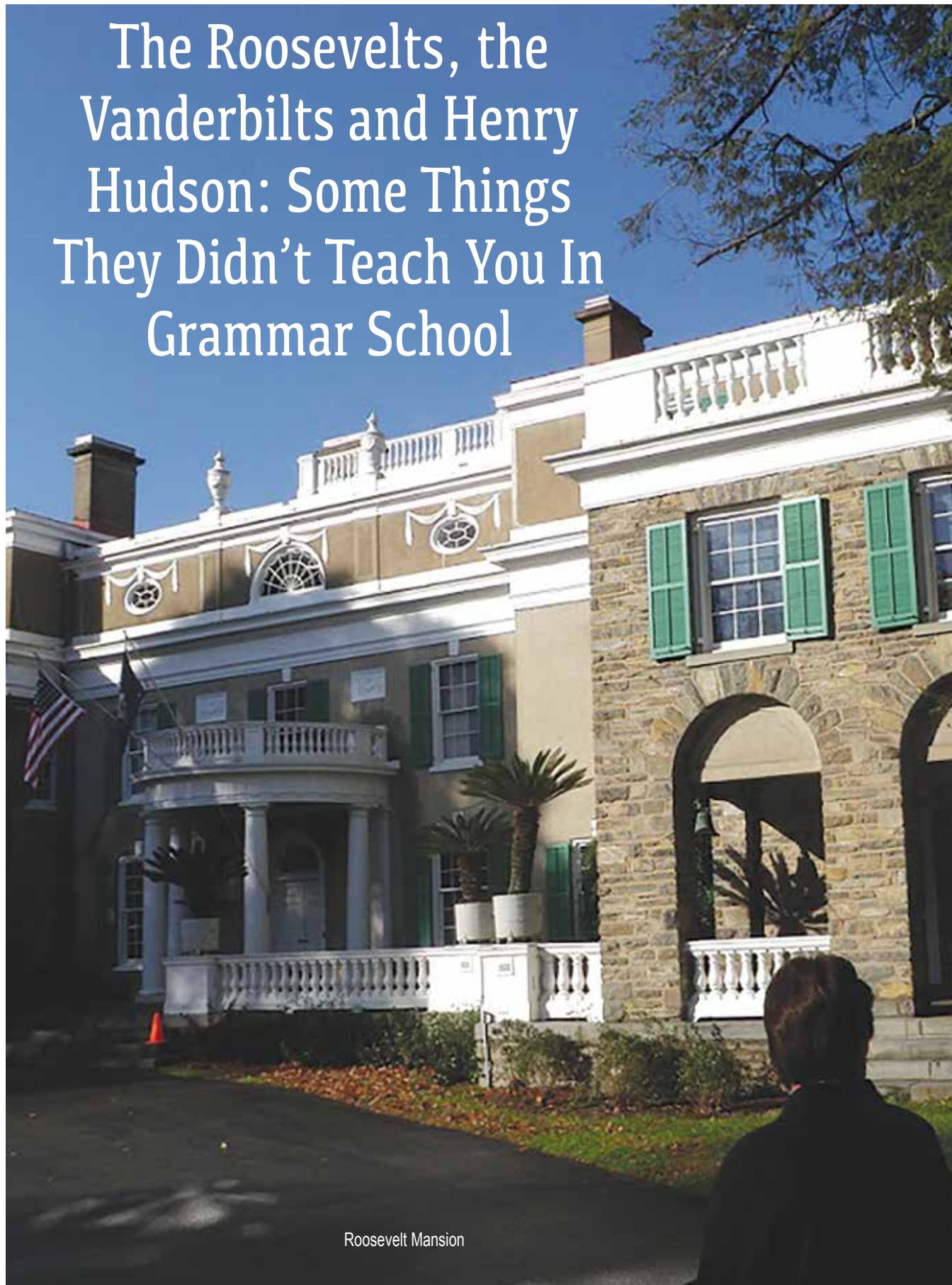


# The Roosevelts, the Vanderbilts and Henry Hudson: Some Things They Didn't Teach You In Grammar School



Roosevelt Mansion



by **Ralph J. Ferrusi**

## “Hi, my name is Ralph, and I’m going to be your tour guide for the next four days.”

As a life-long resident of the mid-Hudson Valley, I've spent a lot of time Boating on the Hudson (and Beyond...), hiking, biking, canoeing, skiing, cross-country skiing, and, tour-guiding.

For several happy years I guided Historic Hudson Valley tours, visiting the FDR and Vanderbilt estates, Innisfree and Wethersfield Gardens, the Millbrook Vineyards, Uncle Sonny's in Standfordville (sampling his famous tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches), etc.,etc.

The evening before we set out touring, I'd give my clients a rundown of what to expect the following day. We were all taught a bit about the Roosevelts, the Vanderbilts, and, Henry Hudson, probably as far back as grammar school. But, did anyone ever tell you, for example, that Frederick Vanderbilt married the divorced wife of one of his sister's sons????!! I'll bet not.

### The Roosevelts

The property goes back to the late 1700's, as a working farm, with absentee landlords. FDR's father, James, bought the property in 1876 with his first wife Rebecca Howland and their son James. They always had property in Manhattan, and wintered in the city or Europe, and summered on the farm. Rebecca died in 1876 and James married Sara Delano of Newburgh (!!!) in 1880, and Franklin was born January 30, 1882 in the Hyde Park "house". His father was 54, his mother was 28...

Fast forward to March 17, 1905, when then 23-year-old Franklin marries his cousin (Jerry Lee Lewis was raked over the coals 52 years later for doing pretty much the same thing, but, then again, Myra was 13 years old) Anna Eleanor Roosevelt in New York City: uncle Theodore Roosevelt "gave her away". March 17th was Anna's (Eleanor's) mother's birthday. Her mother died when she was 8, her father died when she was 11. She was raised by her mother's mother, in New York City and their family home in Tivoli.

In 1915 FDR and his mother (a HUGE influence on him all his life) enlarged the Hyde Park "house" from 17 to 35 rooms to make room for FDR's growing family: Eleanor and FDR had six children, five lived to adulthood. The enlarged house became the relatively modest sea-foam-green-shuttered mansion (think of the grey looming stone hulks of the Vanderbilt and Mills mansions, right up the river) that we now know as "Springwood". Besides Springwood, the Roosevelts acquired "Campobello", in New Brunswick, in 1883, and Warm Springs, Georgia, in 1924.

I think it's pretty safe to say we all picture FDR as an older man with a grey suit wearing wire-rimmed glasses, sitting down, smiling, holding a cigarette in a cigarette holder. There's a picture of him in Springwood as a young man: tall, lean, fit, and very good-looking, wearing tennis (or nautical???) whites; he golfed and he sailed. He always loved the sea, and as President always "had use of presidential yachts", and "loved to sail on the big naval ships, all over the world". He spoke, and wrote, both German and French.

33-year-old FDR was elected to the New York State Senate in 1910 and re-elected in 1912. He resigned in 1913, becoming Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He resigned in 1920 to run for Vice President to Democrat James M. Cox, but they were slammed, almost 4 to 1, by Republican Warren G. Harding. A polio attack in 1921 (he was only 39...) then "kept him out of the political spotlight". He was elected Governor of New York State in 1928 and 1930, and the 32nd President

of the United States in 1932, at age 50. He is the only US President elected four times: he was 80 days into his fourth term in 1945 when he died in Warm Springs at the age of 63. He is the first (and only) President to design a golf course—nine holes, Campobello, New Brunswick—and designed the very first “Presidential Library”.

FDR bought the land that is now known as Val-Kill in 1911 as a “forestry project” and in 1925 built Eleanor and two friends, Nancy Cook and Marian Dickerman, a stone cottage. In 1976/77 the then-owners decided to sell the property, and a local Hyde Park environmental group “lobbied Congress” to save it. It was opened to the public in 1984 on what would have been Eleanor’s 100th birthday. It is the only US government property dedicated to a First Lady.

FDR purchased the Top Cottage property in 1935/36, the cottage was completed in 1939, and used by FDR until 1945. Open Space Institute bought it in 1996 and it was opened by the National Park Service in 2001. The famous “hot dog picnic” with Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, and King George VI took place at Top Cottage.

Vanderbilt Mansion.



**The Hyde Park Vanderbilts.**

In 1624 America’s first Vanderbilt—Jan Aertson van der Bilt—immigrated from Holland as an indentured servant. In the 1900’s, the Vanderbilts owned 16 (maybe 22) railroads—including the New

York Central—and numerous mansions, yachts, and race horses. At his death in 1938 Frederick William Vanderbilt was worth \$79,845,478.00.

Frederick, born February 2, 1856, was one of “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt’s grandsons. By the way, Cornelius, at age 19, married his first cousin Sophia, and they had 13 children together. Around 150 years later Jerry Lee Lewis gets slammed... Frederick’s father, Willam Henry “Billy”

an Adirondack Great Camp on the Saint Regis River. Spring in Hyde Park, Summers between Bar Harbor and the Adirondacks, Fall in Hyde park, and Winters in New York City and Palm Beach, Florida. Yup... Louise made yearly trips to Europe: Paris was her favorite. She died there in 1926 at age 82 from a failed appendix operation. He died in the Hyde Park mansion in 1938, also at 82.



Roosevelt Mansion

Vanderbilt was the fourth of Cornelius’s thirteen. Billy had eight kids, and Frederick was number three.

Frederick and Louise—the former Louise Holmes Anthony of Newport, Rhode Island—were married in 1878. He was 22, she was 34, and was divorced from his cousin (one of his sister’s sons), Alfred Torrance. It was “a bit of a scandal” at the time. They were “unable to have children”.

In 1895 they bought a mansion and a 700-acre working farm in Hyde Park for \$125,000.00: a pretty hefty sum in those days. They tore down the “structurally unsound” original mansion and built a new, very sound, 54-room mansion between 1896 and 1898. Astonishingly they lived in it for only six weeks in the Spring and six weeks in the Fall. The mansion was run by a full-time staff of 60 locals. His siblings referred to Frederick’s Hyde Park mansion as “Freddie’s little cottage on the Hudson”. His brother George Washington Vanderbilt’s 250-room “Biltmore” in North Carolina had 43 bathrooms...

Frederick and Louise also owned fancy property in Manhattan, “Rough Point” in Newport, Rhode Island, “Sonogee” in Bar Harbor, Maine, and

The mansion and 211 acres on the river side of Route 9 were given to the National Park Service in 1940 by Louise’s niece Margaret Van Alen (of Newport...): wealthy in her own right, she “didn’t want it”.

**Henry Hudson: a Readers Digest version:**

Famously sailed up the Hudson River in 1609, seeking the fabled Northwest Passage to the riches of India, where he also hoped to pick up some good vegetarian recipes for his cousin Harriet. He is greeted by peaceful, friendly natives in what is now Yonkers. He opens fire on them.

It wasn’t the Hudson then, the natives called it “Muhheakunnuk”—“the river that flows two ways”—or more commonly, just “the river”; much easier to pronounce, and spell. Henry briefly considered renaming the river “Harriet” after his favorite cousin, but wisely thought better of this.

His favorite cousin??? Oh no!!!!!!



Eleanore and FDR in bronze.