

# 'ARCHITECT'



# ROOSEVELT

## *FDR'S IMPACT ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE HUDSON VALLEY*

Prepared for the Potomac Association  
by Les Dropkin, May 2005

# CONTENTS

	Page
FORESHADOWINGS .....	2
SPRINGWOOD .....	3
VAL – KILL (STONE COTTAGE AND VAL – KILL COTTAGE) .....	4
TOP COTTAGE .....	7
THE FDR LIBRARY .....	12
A ROOSEVELT LEGACY .....	14
APPENDIX A : .....	18
APPENDIX B : The “Girls” Of Val –Kill .....	19
APPENDIX C : Contretemps – The <b>LIFE</b> Magazine Article .....	22
Sources .....	25

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## FORESHADOWINGS

Situated on the crest of Dutchess Hill with a view of the Roosevelt family home at Hyde Park and the Hudson River beyond is Top Cottage, FDR's special retreat. Designed and built by President Roosevelt in the late thirties, it is an exemplar of a less well known facet of FDR – his impact on the architectural landscape of the Hudson Valley, particularly in its mid and upper regions.

FDR had deep roots in the history of that land, its people and their homes. It may fairly be said that he had a lasting love affair with the valley, its history and its architecture, deriving from the Roosevelt family's long association with the region. However much time he spent away from the Hudson Valley, he never failed to maintain his interest in, and ties with, the countryside where he grew up.

His interest in the history of his family and of the Valley showed itself early on. In 1901, at age 19 and while at Harvard, he wrote a term paper titled "*The Roosevelt Family in New Amsterdam Before the Revolution*". Later that year the Christmas gift he gave to his mother was a book – "*Early New York Houses with Historical and Genealogical Notes*".

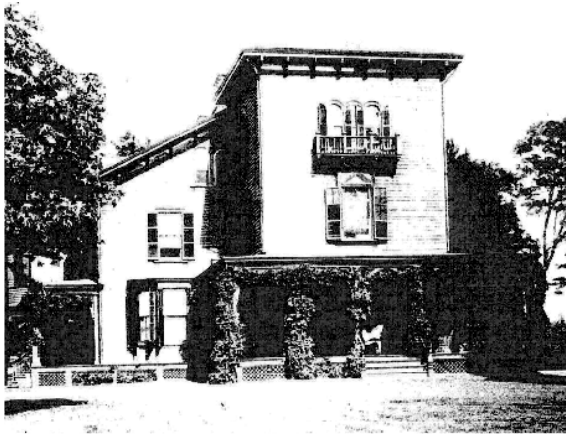
In 1910 he became a member of the Holland Society of New York, a Dutch historical group whose membership was restricted to descendants in the direct male line of a Dutchman residing in the Colonies before 1675 – a requirement he could easily meet since Claes Martinszen Van Rosenvelt had arrived in New Amsterdam in the 1640's. In 1914 he became a founding member of the Dutchess County Historical Society together with Helen Wilkinson Reynolds, a Professor at Vassar generally regarded as the foremost historian of Dutchess County. Subsequently he would serve for 10 years as official historian of Hyde Park.

One of the consequences of contracting polio in August 1921 was that he now had more time to spend on his architectural and historical interests. He began to spend time with Professor Reynolds driving through the countryside and persuaded the Holland Society to publish her book "*Dutch Houses in the Hudson Valley before 1776*" in 1928. He also arranged to have the Holland Society make a photographic record of old Dutch houses

Appendix A contains an excerpt from FDR's introduction to the 1928 Reynolds book and part of FDR's greeting to a 1935 meeting of the Holland Society of New York.

## SPRINGWOOD

When James bought Springwood in 1827 it was a large farmhouse, dating to about 1800. A three story tower and a full length covered porch had already been added to the original structure; later James and Sara added two rooms and enlarged the servants wing.



Springwood in 1900, seen from the south,  
before the 1915 Remodeling

Perhaps FDR had thoughts of enlarging Springwood ever since his marriage and although Sara had wired the house for electricity in 1908, patched up a hole in the roof as necessary or shored up a bit of the porch here and there, she stoutly resisted any thoughts of a major alteration. But by 1914 the house in which Franklin had grown up as the only child of James and Sara was now also a home for Eleanor and the five children. It was time for a remodeling of Springwood and an opportunity for FDR to exercise his architectural talents.

Although FDR would probably have wanted to turn Springwood into a Colonial Dutch fieldstone home and had begun sketching his ideas for the house, it was his mother's, not his, and he had to accommodate to her choice of architect and her wishes. (The estate went to his mother after James' death in 1900; it was not until Sara's death in 1941 that FDR had title in his own name to all of the Hyde Park property.)

The old clapboards came off, the verandas were dismantled and the south tower, where Franklin had played in its attic as a boy, was lowered; a matching second tower was built on the north. He was able to persuade Sara to use fieldstone on the two new wings instead of the stucco and brick she had originally wanted, even though it meant extra cost. The fieldstone

used was “harvested” from old walls on the property and laid in the exactly the same way as had been done for the superintendent’s cottage on the Newbold estate that bordered the Roosevelt land just to the north. The pitched roof was raised so as to create a flat-roofed third story and most of the porch was replaced with a fieldstone terrace with a balustrade and a small columned portico.



Springwood as the family home appears today  
after the 1915 Remodeling

### VAL – KILL (STONE COTTAGE AND VAL – KILL COTTAGE)

FDR’s first opportunity to realize his ambition to revive Dutch colonial architecture in the Hudson Valley - characterized by simplicity and the use of fieldstone - came in 1924 with the decision to build Val – Kill for Eleanor and her friends Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman.

The idea of building Val - Kill resulted from the coalescing of several factors that year. FDR had discovered Warm Springs and both he and his doctor felt that the swimming he had done there had been a great help to him. Building a sun-warmed pool near Springwood was an idea he had been thinking about and some tentative plans had been made. But that idea was shelved after one particular picnic.

Eleanor, Nancy and Marion – often accompanied by Franklin – liked to picnic in the countryside. On this occasion they were picnicking along the banks of Fallkill brook when Eleanor mentioned that this would probably be the last of the year since Sara was closing down the house until Christmas and they would have no place to get together. At that point, according to Marion Dickerman, FDR said : “But aren’t you girls silly? This isn’t Mother’s land. I bought this acreage myself. And why shouldn’t you three have a cottage here of your own, so you could come and go as you please?”

FDR had indeed bought about 200 acres of land in September, 1911. It was just east of Sara's estate. After giving them a life interest in the property and offering to build a swimming pool he was writing to friends about it. The way he phrased it in an August 5<sup>th</sup> letter to Elliot Brown, a contractor friend, was:

“ My missus and some of her female political friends want to build a shack on a stream in the back woods and want, instead of a beautiful marble bath, to have the stream dug out so as to form an old-fashioned swimming hole.”

While Eleanor felt that she should have a proper influence on decisions affecting the design and construction, she was made to realize that this was very much Franklin's project. He hired Henry Toombs, an architect he had come to know in connection with the work being done at Warm Springs; he insisted that the cottage reflect the true Dutch Colonial style; he supervised all details in the planning and in the construction. Throughout 1925 as the work proceeded the tension between Eleanor and Franklin grew. Finally, the “girls”, as he called them, decided to remove themselves and leave everything to Franklin and Henry Toombs.



The Stone Cottage at Val - Kill

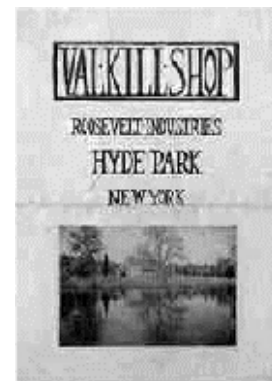
Although not publicly stated, almost certainly there were other factors behind FDR's offer to build Val – Kill, the old Dutch word for its location (“val” – waterfall; “kill” – brook or stream). He realized that the accommodation Eleanor had to make because of his polio was imposing stress on her. Also, Eleanor was changing during these years of the 1920's. She had come to know and become friends with a number of strong women. It was Nancy Cook, the executive secretary of the Women's Division of the state Democratic Party, who in 1922 had invited Eleanor to speak at a fund raising luncheon – this at a time when she was horrified at the thought of speaking in public. She did accept the invitation – partially to get out of the sickroom and

partially to keep FDR's name before the public. The speech went well and she and Nancy became fast friends.

Not long after that occasion Eleanor met Nancy's partner Marion Dickerman. Later, she and Marion would buy and run the Todhunter school. Another member of Eleanor's circle, a cousin of Henry Toombs, was Caroline O'Day, co-chair of the Democratic State Committee and head of its Women's Division. Appendix B contains brief biographies of these women.

Gracious as Sara might be, there also was the tension between her and Eleanor. In sum, at some level Franklin – unlike Sara - realized that the time had come for Eleanor to have her own space. After Val – Kill was built, Sara simply could not understand why Eleanor needed a separate house even though Eleanor and her friends were welcome at the “big house”, as Springwood was coming to be called to distinguish it from Eleanor's house at Val – Kill. Sara asked one of Eleanor's friends: “Can you tell me why Eleanor wants to go over to the Val – Kill cottage to sleep every night? Why doesn't she sleep here? This is her home. This is her house. Why does she – she waits until late evening and then gets in her car and goes over there to sleep, and we don't see her until the next morning.”

After completion of the cottage, Nancy, who was artistic, filled it with furniture of her own making. She also conceived the idea of making handcrafted replicas of early American furniture in a workshop at Val – Kill that could be sold through brochures. FDR supported the new enterprise, named Val – Kill Industries, as a means of giving employment to local farmers in the off – season to supplement their income. It was his hope that this would prove to be a way of helping stop the flow of people from the country to the city. The two story factory that was built next to Eleanor's house came to be called Val – Kill Cottage, while Eleanor's house was referred to as Stone Cottage.



VAL – KILL COTTAGE and CATALOGUE

To promote the business, exhibitions were held – often in the Roosevelt’s 65<sup>th</sup> Street house. Although the business was expanded to include pewter and cloth weavings and at its most successful had expanded the work force from an original six to thirty, it never became a profit making enterprise. Making authentic handcrafted replicas of American furniture was expensive and Val – Kill Industries could not survive the Great Depression.

The business closed in 1936. Eleanor then had the factory remodeled into a home for herself and guests. It became her principle residence after the death of President Roosevelt in 1945. Never fully comfortable in the 65<sup>th</sup> Street townhouse in New York City or in the big house at Hyde Park, Stone Cottage was her true home, as was Val – Kill Cottage later.

### TOP COTTAGE

In December 1942, several years after he had built his hilltop retreat, FDR wrote a memo that explained the reasons why, not long after assuming the presidency, he had come to the realization that simply going home to Springwood for visits would not provide the sufficient rest, relaxation, calm and privacy that he felt he needed. In his words:

The trips were intended primarily for a holiday – a chance to read, sort my books, and to make plans for roads, tree plantings, etc. This was seemingly impossible because of (a) visitors in the house; (b) telephone calls; (c) visits from Dutchess county neighbors; (d) visits from various people who, knowing that 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 escape the mob.”

Specific plans for the “small place” he would come to build began to crystallize in 1935 when, in June, he purchased the eastern part of a property on Dutchess hill, one of the highest points in the county. This was the countryside that Franklin knew well. He had roamed through these woods as a boy. And it was here that he brought Margaret Suckley, a distant unmarried cousin whom he had first met in 1922. After Franklin contracted polio he was cut off from the normal social interchange that was so important to him because Eleanor was busy with the children and Sara had established a rigid routine for him. He was lonely and needed to see people. Recognizing this, Sara often invited Margaret, who lived close to Hyde Park, to come down to Springwood.

During these first years as an invalid, they became very close companions – a relationship that would last for the rest of his life. Margaret – “Daisy” to Franklin – would be the one person with whom he could be totally at ease, someone whom he could trust completely – even with state secrets that he would otherwise share with only a very few. As is well known, there



are literally just a handful of photos of FDR in a wheelchair; of these most were taken by Margaret Suckley – an indication of the openness between them .

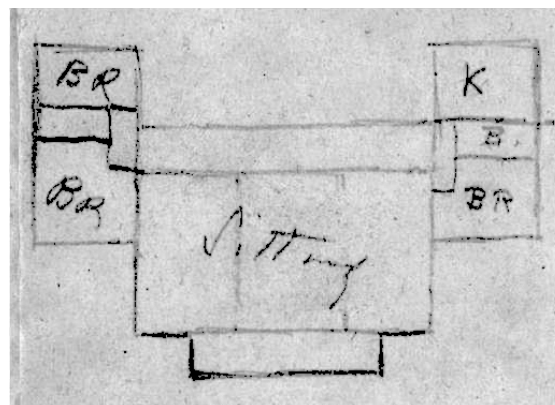
And it was Daisy, who, in 1940, trained and then gave to FDR a little 7 month old Scotch terrier she had named Big Boy, a name that he soon changed to Murray the Outlaw of Falahill (after a Scottish ancestor) and which, in turn, was soon shortened to Fala.

When Franklin and Daisy visited his Dutchess hill property throughout 1935 and 1936, he would talk about the future and what he thought he might do after leaving the presidency – there was no thought of more than the traditional two terms at that time. They began to refer to “our hill” and it seems clear that, for Daisy at least, there was the possibility that she and Franklin might have some future together there in his hideaway cottage.

In March 1937, FDR purchased the remaining, western, portion of the farm property he had bought in 1935. The family estate, still held by Sara at this point, Val – Kill and Dutchess Hill now formed a continuous expanse. One could look down and across the Hudson valley, letting the eye pause at Springwood, to the river beyond.

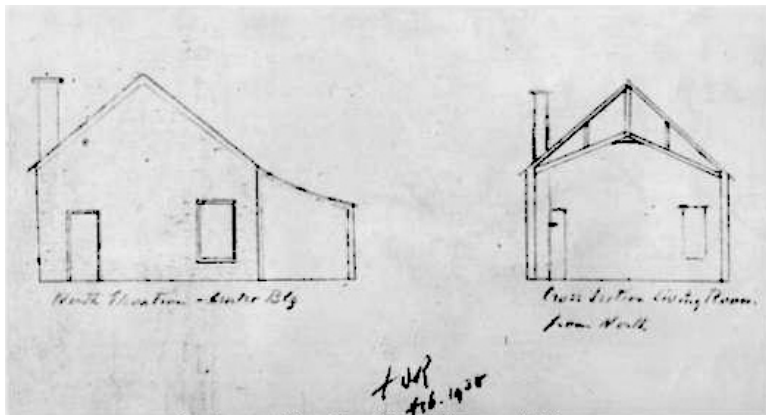
There never was any question but that he would design the cottage in the Dutch Colonial style. From his study of the homes of the early settlers in the Hudson Valley he had learned of the “extremely simple” living of both large and small landowners. For him that architecture represented “...a quality of endurance against great odds – a quality of quiet determination to conquer obstacles of nature and obstacles of man.” Theirs would be the example of how he planned to live.

He began putting his ideas down on paper in 1937. His first sketch, although quite simple, already showed the concept that would remain the basis of later designs:



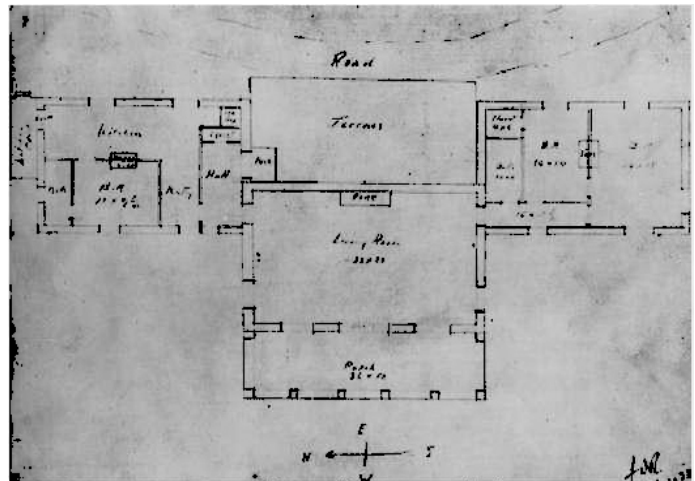
The cottage would be one story in height, have a high pitched roof and three sections – two symmetrical wings that flanked a large living room. Bedrooms and a kitchen were to be in the wings; the living room would open onto a porch that faced west. Unique in concept at the time were several ideas that would make it wheelchair accessible: there would be no steps for entering the house – a ramp would run up to the porch on one side; the floors would be flush, so that there would be no barriers to easy movement throughout the cottage. Also the Dutch Colonial style, conveniently, used low windows.

In February 1938 he showed several of his drawings to Henry Toombs, who was working with him on the FDR Library project. His involvement with details, as well as his not inconsiderable architectural drafting skills, are revealed in these drawings.

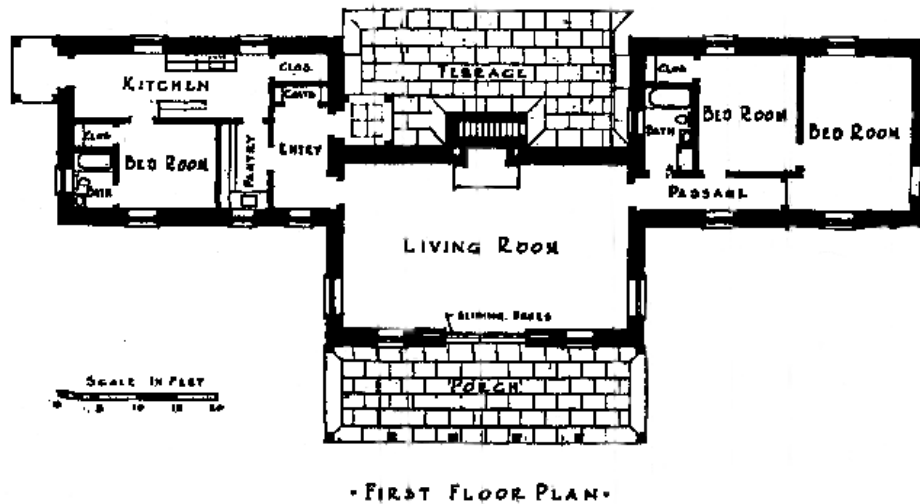


Drawing initialed and dated Feb. 1938, showing the north elevation of the center building and a cross-section of the living room from the north.

Drawing initialed and dated Feb. 1938, showing a detailed floor plan of Top Cottage.



It is interesting to compare FDR's drawing with the finished version prepared by Toombs:



Actual work on the construction began in 1938. FDR used the occasion of the visit of Crown Princess Louise to Hyde Park in July to invite the press to the work site. While there he mentioned that it would be a house without a telephone where he could go to “get away from it all”, talked about the fact that the 410 foot elevation at the crest of Dutchess Hill meant that there would be no mosquitoes and spoke about the 150 year – old fieldstone that would be used. A little later in the year the media was supplied with detailed information that served as the basis for the several articles that began to appear in newspapers, often in the Sunday editions, such as the one in the New York Times on October 9<sup>th</sup>. Included in the material furnished to the media were two drawings, one of the front and one of the rear, in an artist’s rendition of what the house would look like:



Artist's Drawing of Top Cottage;  
Front View, Rear View

LIFE magazine also ran a similar article later in October. This time something of a brouhaha resulted, in part because the artist's drawing carried a legend that identified Franklin D. Roosevelt as the architect and Henry J. Toombs as his Associate. Appendix C has the details.

Completed in 1939, Top Cottage did indeed become FDR's place of retreat. As with Eleanor and Val – Kill, Sara could not fully understand why he needed a separate house. Franklin did promise her, however, that whenever she was at Hyde Park he would sleep at the big house and not at the cottage.

A sense of all that Top Cottage meant to FDR is provided by the following photo that shows him on the porch:



As mentioned above, Top Cottage was a place where he felt good enough about himself to allow photos where the wheelchair was not hidden away. One such shows him with Fala and Ruthie Bie, the caretaker's daughter; another is a shot of the living room where the chair can be seen through the doorway:



Over the course of years many notables had the opportunity to visit or stay at Top Cottage. One of the best known occasions occurred in June 1939 when King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were visiting the United States. After the formal state reception in Washington, D.C., a cruise on the *Potomac* to Mount Vernon and a stop at the World's Fair in New York City they went to Hyde Park. The first night's dinner was at Springwood – a casual dinner between two families, as the press described it. The next day's event was even more informal, a picnic served on the porch at Top Cottage, with hot dogs and dripping mustard – although, it must be said, on silver service.

After Pearl Harbor, Top Cottage became the setting for discussions of war strategy with Winston Churchill and other major figures. It is believed to be at Top Cottage, for example, that the President and the Prime Minister discussed the feasibility of the atomic bomb.

Unlike Springwood, Val – Kill and the FDR library, of which the public always remained aware, Top Cottage was sold to a private party seven years after President Roosevelt died and was forgotten for fifty years until it was acquired in 1996 by an affiliate of the Open Space Conservancy. Now restored, it was opened to the public in 2001.

## THE FDR LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

The concept of a presidential library and museum that preserves in a single location all of the papers, documents, photographs, memoranda, books and memorabilia of a president originated with President Roosevelt. The institution he created embodied two ideas: (1) that the collection would embrace his entire life, not only the presidency; (2) that the library and museum would be deeded over to the government to become the public's property after being built with private funds.

It will not surprise us to learn that FDR was intimately involved in all the planning for the library and in all the details of its construction, not only the external appearance but the interior as well – stack space, exhibit rooms for his own collections, a room for the use of the local historical society, a research room and his own study. His concern with the minutest details is well illustrated by the fact that he even designed the document boxes.

He began sketching his ideas in 1937, working with Henry Toombs. In 1938, Louis Simon, head architect of the General Services Administration and the supervising architect of the National Archival building replaced Toombs.

The museum section was dedicated on June 30, 1941 and opened to the public one day later for an admission fee of 25¢. While still in the planning stage there had been a discussion as to whether too much space

was being allotted to the museum function. FDR is quoted as saying: “Well, you know if people have to pay a quarter to get into the library they will want to see something interesting inside.”

With the onset of World War II, the opening of the library as a research center was deferred. Several thousands of books and over fifteen thousand cubic feet of records had been received in Hyde Park by mid 1941, yet the vast majority of the material that would make up the library’s collection still remained in Washington. The museum director said at the time: “We have nothing to excite scholars yet. We have important segments but we haven’t continuous records of any one subject.” He also said that they expected to be able to open the research facility “reasonably soon” – a date that turned out to be May 1, 1946, thirteen months after the President’s death.

The library and museum, perhaps, was the most important of the buildings in the Dutch Colonial style that were built under his direction. Again using the native fieldstone, it is one story in height with the typical high pitched roof and formed an open square.



The FDR Library and Museum

When FDR was in Hyde Park he often spent time in the library working on the collection – sorting, classifying, arranging and cataloging. He had the the help of the library staff in these tasks, one of whom was Margaret Suckley, who was appointed in September 1941.

FDR was soon thinking about the need to expand in order to provide space for Eleanor’s papers. In 1942 he made a rough sketch in which



additional area was provided by adding wings on the north and south sides; this expansion was realized in 1969.

Daisy kept a diary while at the library. The last entry in the diary is dated April 14, 1945:

The most interesting period of this library is over, the period of the President's association with it. What we must try to do is make it the kind of place the President wanted it to be— His spirit is here, and when I get a sort of helpless, "what's the use in doing anything" feeling, I can feel his thought that no matter what happens, one must never give up— that was his motto and the reason of his greatness. The president's room I hope will remain as it is always— for he fixed it this way, placed the furniture, had the pictures hung, etc.

### A Roosevelt Legacy

FDR's impact on the public face of the lower Hudson Valley was made manifest in 1926 when he convinced Sara, who was building and donating the James Roosevelt Memorial Library to the town of Hyde Park, to use fieldstone in its construction and Henry Toombs as designer.



The James Roosevelt Memorial Library

With his election as president, he was able to call upon the resources of the office to use New Deal public works projects to further the restoration of the Dutch Colonial style in the lower Hudson Valley – particularly in the use of native fieldstone. Four post offices in Dutchess County, three schools in Hyde Park and the Poughkeepsie Newspaper Building testify to the enduring impact of his architectural knowledge and enthusiasm.

In 1934 the residents of Saugerties asked President Roosevelt for his aid in getting the new post office built of local brick and native bluestone rather than the standard Georgian Revival façade with mat face brick and cast – concrete design. Their interest was one of securing local jobs for the project rather than historic architecture, but it did prompt FDR to write a letter in which he said: “ It would be a fine thing if this building could be built of stone which is the natural building material used by the early settlers.” He went on to say that if using local stone was too expensive, local brick was an acceptable alternative. As built, native bluestone was used only for the trim but local brick was used elsewhere.

The President was quite willing to do battle for his ideas. In 1936, Treasury Secretary Morgenthau, a neighbor and ally of FDR, rejected the sketches for a Greek Revival building that had been prepared by the government architect for a new Poughkeepsie post office. Morgenthau insisted that it be built with fieldstone, as was the James Roosevelt Memorial

Library, and be modeled after the 1809 Dutchess County courthouse. Although no longer in existence, a picture of it was supplied by Helen



The Poughkeepsie Post Office

Wilkinson Reynolds. The architect, who contacted Henry Toombs about the Library, nevertheless came back with a design that used granite. The architect's plans were repeatedly rejected by FDR until they met his wishes.

FDR also took special interest in the murals that were being planned for the Post Office. He wanted to be sure that the artist included a panel that depicted the Ratification Convention of 1788 because FDR's ancestor, Issac Roosevelt, had played an important part in securing New York's assent to the Constitution – a fact that FDR was particularly eager to emphasize.

The next Dutchess County post office that FDR concerned himself with was the new one to be built in Rhinebeck. Here he insisted that it should be modeled after "Kipsbergen", a home dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and occupied by the Beekmans, Roosevelt ancestors. FDR's reason for replicating the building, which was totally destroyed in a fire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was that – according to him – it had been the first house of a settler in Dutchess County and also because it had been used as George Washington's headquarters during the Revolutionary War. In fact these claims were false and Helen Wilkinson Reynolds objected to his choice, but FDR prevailed.



The Rhinebeck Post Office



Kipsbergen

At the dedication on May 1, 1939 FDR explained his thoughts on the architecture he was so intent on seeing used in these new buildings:

"We are seeking to follow the type of architecture which is good in the sense that it does not of necessity follow the whims of the moment but seeks an artistry that ought to be good, as far as we can tell, for all time to come. And we are trying to adapt the design to the historical background of

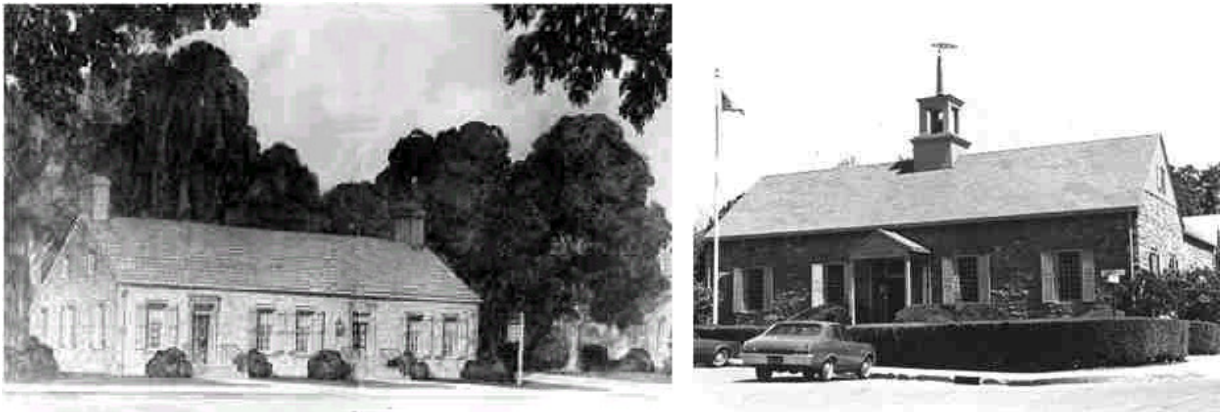


the locality and to use, insofar as possible, the materials which are indigenous to the locality itself. Hence, fieldstone for Dutchess County. Hence the efforts during the past few years in Federal buildings in the Hudson River Valley to use fieldstone and to copy the early Dutch architecture which was so essentially sound besides being very attractive to the eye.”

For the murals here, FDR decided that he wanted historical scenes from Rhinebeck’s past. Accordingly, he commissioned a Rhinebeck resident, who was a Vassar trained artist and head of the Treasury Department’s Relief Art Project, to paint the murals.

The President continued his active role in these public works programs in Dutchess County. In 1938 it was the new Post Office in Wappinger Falls that engaged his attention. He wrote a letter to the project manager, stating:“ I have very definite ideas about the type of building – preferably a long, low bldg. with an attach and built of fieldstone.”

As Dutchess County acquired its fieldstone post offices, other towns in the Hudson Valley began to be heard from. One of these was Ellenville. Their new post office was being designed in brick, although they had almost a hundred stone houses dating from before the Revolutionary War. A telegram to the President evoked this response “I will stop that brick right away.” The final design, approved by FDR himself, utilized many features that typified these houses.



Part of The Roosevelt Legacy: Wappingers Falls Post Office (left); Ellenville Post Office (right)

Of course the post office that Franklin Roosevelt most wanted to see built in a historic manner was the one for Hyde Park. Modeled on a stone house built in 1772, the new post office incorporated fieldstone from the land on which the house stood. To further the import of the post office, the history of Hyde Park was made the theme of its murals, with FDR choosing to use the same artist who had done the Rhinebeck murals.



The Hyde Park Post Office: Exterior (left); Olin Dows Mural (right)



The public architectural impact of FDR in the Hudson Valley - using public works projects that incorporate the area's history – was not confined to post offices. Several schools in Hyde Park also share in the use of Dutchess County fieldstone. Once the United States entered World War II, FDR's time and energy could no longer be given to these sorts of projects. The final building that engaged him was the Beekman Town Hall [left], finished in 1942.

While he was unable to undertake these projects, he did not totally abandon his objective of restoring and preserving the Valley's architectural heritage. A very simple gesture was capable of expressing his ideals: He had the colonial mile markers along the old Post Road (today's Route 9) surrounded with fieldstone [right].



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Architectural continuity was important to FDR. In Washington that meant continuing the classical style; in Dutchess County it meant the Dutch Colonial tradition with its use of simple, sturdy fieldstone construction – old fieldstone taken, where possible, from local sites. Almost always based on historic structures, the stone structures we see today reflect values of humility and honesty.

## APPENDIX A

In the introduction to Helen Wilkinson Reynold's book "*Dutch Houses in the Hudson Valley before 1776*", FDR explains how his interest began:

The genesis of my interest in Dutch Houses of 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 from the march of modern civilization."

The house that had been destroyed would probably have looked much like one of the following in size, material and plan:



The Crosby Place  
House,  
Rhinebeck



The Stoutenberg House,  
Hyde Park

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On January 17, 1935, President Roosevelt sent greetings to a meeting of the Holland Society of New York. He said, in part:

Our early forbears brought from the Netherlands a quality of endurance against great odds – a quality of quiet determination to conquer obstacles of nature and obstacles of man. That is why for many years I have been so deeply interested in the preservation of the records and monuments left in New York City and the Hudson River Valley by the Dutch pioneers. The influence of New Netherland on the whole Colonial period of our history, which culminated in the War for Independence, has not as yet been fully recognized. It was an influence which made itself felt in all of the other twelve Colonies, and it is an influence which manifests itself today in almost every part of our Union of States.

## APPENDIX B

### The “Girls” At Val – Kill

#### Nancy Cook (1884 – 1962) and Marion Dickerman (1890 – 1983)

While attending Syracuse University both lived in the same boarding house and both became involved in the burgeoning women’s movement, supporting the right of women to vote, the abolishment of child labor and world peace. After graduation Nancy became a teacher of art and handicrafts in a high school in Fulton, N.Y., a position she would hold from 1913 to 1918. Marion, who had received a B.A. in 1911 and a graduate degree in education in 1912, In 1913 she accepted a position teaching American History, also in Fulton. While in Fulton she and Marion became reacquainted. As partners, they would share their lifelong interest and work.

During World War 1, they worked with the Red Cross, for the Liberty Loan bond drives and then, in London assisting in a military hospital where Nancy quickly learned to make artificial limbs for disabled soldiers.

When they returned to Fulton they learned that women’s suffrage had been enacted in New York and that Marion had been nominated to run for the New York State Assembly. The run for office was unsuccessful, but Nancy’s abilities in managing the campaign were noticed by party leaders who were eager to capture women voters for the Democratic Party. Asked to join the staff of the Women’s Division of the party, she would serve as executive secretary for nineteen years and played a key role in FDR’s gubernatorial and presidential campaigns.

In 1921 Marion was appointed Dean at the New Jersey State College in Trenton but she wanted something in, or close to, New York City where Nancy now was. In 1922 she was able to move to the city when she joined the faculty of the Todhunter School, a progressive private school that put emphasis on the arts. In June of that year she met Eleanor when she and Nancy were invited to Hyde Park for a weekend visit.

Working together in the Women’s Trade Union League, the League of Women Voters and the Democratic National Committee, the three were drawn together as they shared their progressive political and social ideals and as they would share the Val – Kill venture.





At Val - Kill  
Eleanor with Nancy; Marion

The cottage at Val – Kill became home for Nancy and Marion in 1925. Nancy had responsibility for the management of Val – Kill Industries throughout its 10 year existence.

Eleanor, Nancy and Marion bought the Todhunter School in 1926 and Eleanor became a teacher there of American History, American Literature and English.

In 1933, Eleanor, now the president’s wife, became interested in the Arthurdale, West Virginia enterprise – an early New Deal program in which poor laborers were resettled in newly constructed towns. Eleanor asked Nancy to work with the program and to supervise the woodworking projects of Arthurdale’s Mountain Craftsmen’s Cooperative Association.

As First Lady, Eleanor’s interests and responsibilities expanded, as did her self – confidence and abilities. The relationship between Eleanor on the one hand and Nancy and Marion on the other began to change. When Val – Kill Industries came to a close in 1936, Eleanor had the factory remodeled for her own use when in Hyde Park without involving Nancy and Marion who remained at Stone Cottage.

Eleanor and Marion had a disagreement in 1936 about the wisdom of trying to get a loan to expand Todhunter when the economy was so weak and refused to invest in the expansion. The next year Eleanor would not allow a professional fundraiser hired by Marion to say that Eleanor would be making Todhunter one of her major interests after the White House.

1938 saw the relationship dissolve completely. FDR had named Marion to the President’s Commission to Study Industrial Relations in Great Britain

and Sweden. While she was away overseas Eleanor and Nancy had “ a long and tragic talk” and they “said things which ought not have been said”, according to Marion.

In 1947 Nancy and Marion sold their Val – Kill interest to Eleanor and moved to New Caanan, Connecticut where Marion became director of educational programming for the Marine Museum. Nancy died there in 1962; Marion would die in 1983 in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

Caroline O’Day (1875 - 1943):

Born into a socially prominent Georgia family, she became a freelance artist after studying in New York City and traveling in Europe. While in Europe she met her husband to be, a wealthy businessman Daniel O’Day. Marrying him in New York in 1901, she led a quiet life as wife and mother until his death in 1916.



With substantial assets behind her, she became an activist – working for the New York Consumers League, the Women’s Trade Union League and the Democratic party. She served the Democratic party as Vice – Chairman of the State Committee from 1916 to 1920; as Associate Chairman from 1923 to 1942; as a delegate to the national conventions in 1924, 1928, 1932 and 1936. By 1923, she had met and worked with Eleanor, Nancy and Marion on many projects, including the enterprise at Val - Kill.

An important worker in FDR’s 1932 presidential bid, she was rewarded when President Roosevelt and Eleanor helped her win a seat in Congress in 1934. A strong supporter of the New Deal policies, she became a prominent legislator.

Like much of America, she only slowly came to recognize the gathering threat of the Axis powers. She became seriously ill in 1942 and died in January, 1943.

## APPENDIX C

### Contretemps – The LIFE Magazine Article

The October 17, 1938 issue of LIFE magazine contained a one page article about the building of what LIFE and the media were beginning to refer to as President Roosevelt's "Dream House", i.e. Top Cottage. Most of the page was taken up by three photos of Top Cottage under construction, a photo of the view of the big house from the site and two drawings. One of the drawings was FDR's plan of the cottage; the other was an artist's drawing of how Top Cottage would look when finished.

The artist's drawing as shown here has been edited to emphasize the legend:



The text of the article was just three brief paragraphs:

### **PRESIDENT TURNS ARCHITECT TO DESIGN SUMMER COTTAGE**

To a list of offices filled by one of America's versatile Presidents, *Who's Who* should consider adding a new title—that of architect, for this week the Press received plans for a Hudson River home bearing a legend: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Architect: Henry J. Toombs, Associate.

For 20 years, the President has dreamed of a hideaway overlooking boyhood scenes. Last year he purchased 70 acres adjoining his Hyde Park estate, discovered on a high-topped hill just the view he wanted. Assisted by the Warm Springs, Ga., architect, Henry Toombs, he drafted plans, included Toombs name on them when it was discovered that the President had no architect's license in New York State.

The Presidential retreat is a one-story, five room cottage of field stone. A huge living room occupies the whole center of the house. There will be no guest room, no telephone, no radio and,

Mr. Roosevelt insists, no guards save an electric eye for firing a gun at the approach of intruders. In the diagram below, LIFE-readers may look into the President's new home.

Two weeks later, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, the Letters to the Editor contained four items under the heading "Architect Roosevelt":

1     Sirs:

Is President Roosevelt a nudist as well as an architect and is his cook also a nudist?

We note in your issue of October 17 in the story of the President's summer cottage, for which he drew the plans, that you state there will be no guest room. We therefore infer that the three bedrooms will be occupied by the President, Mrs. Roosevelt and the cook.

The floor plan shows that out of 3 bedrooms only 1 has a clothes closet.

Who wears the clothes?

Doris Carley, West Newton, Mass

Mr. Roosevelt did design one bedroom without a closet. The floor plan shows that out of 3 bedrooms only 1 has a clothes closet. LIFE does not know whose bedroom it is to be. The exterior of the President's "dream cottage" is now nearly finished. – ED

[Apparently Doris Carley (and LIFE's editor ?) was not aware of the fact that FDR did not include closets because Dutch Colonial houses did not have them. ]

.....  
2     Sirs:

I was very much interested in the summer cottage by "Architect" Roosevelt, until in looking over the plans, I found that Mr. Roosevelt, unlike most Americans, prefers to eat in bed. Please note the absence of any dining room.

Harry L. Decker, Frederick, Md.

.....  
3     Sirs:

As Architects in Indiana, with the help of state law, we have been trying to confine the title Architect to only those qualified as Architects. That's bad enough – but after seeing the title Architect after F.D.R. in your magazine, I give up. Put me in a concentration camp.

The moral breakdown of the integrity and dignity of the Architectural profession seems now complete.

John Lloyd Wright, Architect, Michigan City, Ind.

John Lloyd Wright, son of famed Frank Lloyd Wright, should remember Franklin Roosevelt is not the first President to call himself an architect. Thomas Jefferson designed many buildings in Virginia, including Monticello ... and the University of Virginia. – ED

.....  
4     Sirs:

May I hope that in the near future you will give us, your readers, pictures of "Doctor" Roosevelt performing an appendectomy? May I suggest the use of a wax dummy for the sequence?

Hugh E. Jones, Architect, Middleton, N.Y.

[Readers of LIFE magazine in 1938 would probably have known that President Roosevelt had been dubbed "Doctor" by the media – especially by cartoonists – to refer to his programs to "cure" the ills of the depression.]



The idea of showing FDR as the Architect and Henry Toombs as Associate actually started as something like a joke between the two of them. In a letter to President Roosevelt's private secretary, Marguerite "Missy" LeHand dated May 5, 1938, Toombs said:

"I think it would be fun to title the drawings for the President's little house – 'Franklin D. Roosevelt, Architect; Henry J. Toombs, Associate. Of course he hasn't a license to practice Architecture in New York State, but I don't think we would get into trouble. Will you ask him and let me know? As to just how we would split the 'fee' is another matter which I would have to discuss with him later."

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, FDR wrote a memo to Missy in which he said:

"Tell Henry Toombs it is all right to title the drawings Franklin D. Roosevelt, Architect, and Henry J. Toombs, Associate, and that this letter constitutes an assignment of fees from the Architect to the Associate – provided the fees are not exorbitant."

Missy conveyed this message to Toombs in a letter dated May 11<sup>th</sup>. On November 17<sup>th</sup> – information and drawings having been distributed to the media, the LIFE article and the reactions having occurred – Missy sent a memorandum to Toombs (apparently with reference to a reply which Toombs had prepared) which said:

"The President thinks the enclosed is all right and suggests that you might want to add a P.S. as follows: By the way, did Thomas Jefferson have a license when he drew the sketches for Monticello, the University of Virginia and a number of other satisfactory architectural productions?"

That not all architects were aghast at seeing FDR listed as Architect was evidenced early in the following year when the President received a letter from Talmage C. Hughes in the Office of the Executive Secretary of the Michigan Society of Architects. In the letter dated January 4, 1939 he said:

"... It is our hope to include as a principle feature [of the Society's forthcoming Twenty Fifth Annual Convention] a rather complete discussion of Our Presidents as Architects, of which there have been two. First, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Thomas Jefferson did outstanding work, which could be treated in a most interesting way. Then, 138 years later we find our present Chief Executive turning his hand to architecture.

From this mere suggestion you will be able to see the possibilities of the subject. For instance, while the two Presidents were alike in their interest in the common people, President Jefferson's interest in architecture lay in more monumental types for the wealthy, while President Roosevelt who occupies a family mansion carried his liking for the common people even into his architecture, when he designed a cottage on a corner of his estate so that he could live simply like the people he served. ..."

A reply from Missy on January 9<sup>th</sup> said:

"The President asks me to thank you...and to suggest that you get in touch with Mr. Henry Toombs. Mr. Toombs has been the architect of these cottages, the President drew the original floor plans and elevations, which Mr. Toombs took in hand, improved and developed into architectural drawings. Mr. Toombs also supervised, as architect, the actual construction of the cottages...."

## SOURCES

There are, of course, many histories and biographies of Eleanor and Franklin. For the presentation here I primarily used Volume 1 of Blanche Wiesen Cook's biography "*Eleanor Roosevelt*"; Geoffrey C. Ward's "*A First – Class Temperament*", which is a portrait of FDR before the presidency, and "*Sara and Eleanor*" by Janice Pottke, with smaller bits and pieces from Kenneth S. Davis' "*FDR: The Beckonings of Destiny, 1882 – 1928*", Nathan Miller's "*FDR An Intimate History*" and Ted Morgan's "*FDR: A Biography*"

Several websites have a great deal of material. First and foremost is that of the Library and Museum at Hyde Park; in particular, the Wallace Center feature "Dutchess County Stone Buildings". The Poughkeepsie Journal site contains much useful information, as does that of the Disability History Museum under the keyword "Top Cottage".

Also to be mentioned are two special monographs: Helen Wilkinson's "*Dutch Stone Houses in the Hudson Valley Before 1776*" for its introduction by FDR (it was republished by Dover in 1965 as a paperback) and "*The President as Architect: Franklin D. Roosevelt's Top Cottage*" compiled by the John G. Waite Associates, both for the introduction by Geoffrey C. Ward and its illustrations, plans and text.