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"MASTER BEDROOM SUITE"
SAGAMORE HILL NATIONAL
HISTORIC SITE

Researched by

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Sagamore Hill National Historic Site
Oyster Bay, New York

1988?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to Loretta Schmidt, Superintendent of Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, who while on her vacation found and sent me valuable information on 19th Century furniture. Also I would like to thank the reference department of the Oyster Bay-East Norwich Library in Oyster Bay, New York. They were continually searching and finding almost every periodical and book I requested.

The paper, based on extensive notes, correspondence, interviews and other sources, presents a history of the Master Bedroom Suite at Sagamore Hill National Historic Site. This furniture includes three chairs, a table, wardrobe and bed. The thrust of my research was to examine the authenticity of the furniture, attributed to architect Frank Furness and Cabinetmaker Daniel Pabst, masters of their crafts in the latter part of the 19th Century.

The artistic qualities of the furniture are described and discussed (including photographs). The preservation of the valuable suite of furniture is an important aspect of the paper along with recommendations for its restoration.

HISTORY OF THE MASTER BEDROOM SUITE

Sagamore Hill National Historic Site

Sagamore Hill, the home of President Theodore Roosevelt in Oyster Bay, New York contains some of the finest examples of "Modern Gothic" furniture in America during the latter part of the 19th Century. The furniture includes an imposing bedroom suite consisting of a bed, wardrobe, three chairs and a dressing table. Although there are many other fine pieces of furniture throughout the home, the bedroom suite draws the most attention from visitors due to its massive structure, beautiful woods and elaborate carving.

There are conflicting stories as to the origin of this distinctive group of furniture. According to Ethel Roosevelt Derby, younger daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, the furniture belonged to her Grandfather, Theodore Roosevelt Sr. who bought it in 1876 while visiting the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. The suite supposedly was on exhibit and won first prize.¹ However, to date no material on the Centennial showing this furniture has been found - nor has any documentation been located to show that it won an award. TR Sr. did indeed attend the Exposition. He wrote a letter from Philadelphia mentioning the occasion to his son who was at that time a student at Harvard.² He could have seen furniture which he admired and then ordered the suite custom made.

Another story on the origin of the furniture comes from TR's eldest daughter Alice Roosevelt Longworth. She reminisces in a book Mrs. L by Michael Teague. "The thing that attracted me most at Sagamore Hill was the bedroom set in the main bedroom, which was perfectly fascinating. It

had been given to my Grandfather and was of curly maple. Gothic enough to hang bells on, with squares and octagons of dark wood inlaid in light wood. We used to hang our stockings from the bed at Christmas."

Further research reveals that the suite of furniture could have been made for TR Sr. as early as 1873. During that year Theodore Roosevelt's father, a millionaire, built a townhouse at 6 West Fifty^{57th} Street in New York City. All the furniture was custom made, all one of a kind, all rich inlaid woods and mighty in scale. There was a bed built for the master of the house and his lady that might have been commissioned for an oriental Potentate.³ This describes quite accurately the bed.

The design of the suite is attributed to architect Frank Furness and to Daniel Pabst, a superior furniture designer and excellent woodcarver. Both men had shops in Philadelphia during the 1800's. TR Sr. ordered all his principal furniture for his mansion custom made from Philadelphia.⁴ Both men were greatly influenced by Bruce Talbert and Christopher Dresser who were English reform furniture designers of the late 1860's and 70's. Their style was similarly characterized by the following elements; floral ornament carved in low relief, frequently in repeating patterns, rich overall decorations, archeotonic proportions and composition. This style is clearly evident in all pieces of the suite of furniture.

There is documentation that Frank Furness did much of the interior woodwork for the new mansion and that his most notable commission was from TR Sr. In a letter dated September 21, 1873, TR Sr. wrote from New York City to his wife, Mittie, who was in London.⁴ "Furness had dreadfully disappointed me at the last moment about his woodwork and I fear it will not be in when you return."⁵

There is absolutely no proof that Pabst or his shop made any furniture for TR Sr. It is known, however, that TR Sr. was on Pabst's customer list.

Apparently none of the office papers of Frank Furness were preserved

and additional information has been found to illustrate the working relationship between the cabinetmaker and the architect.

There are very few pieces known with Pabst's signature⁵; a sewing box made for his wife, a tall clock, two bookcases and a sideboard which won an award at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial^W Exposition.

The Roosevelt family resided at the Fifty^{57th}seventh Street home from 1873 to 1884. Both President Roosevelt's mother and wife died February 14, 1884. A week after the funeral, the home was sold and the contents were divided among the family.⁶

When the suite arrived at Sagamore Hill is not recorded. It most likely was stored in President Roosevelt's sister's home in New York City while Sagamore Hill was in the process of construction and brought to the home about 1886.

After the death of Theodore's mother and wife, the heartbroken man retreated to his ranch in the Dakota⁵ Badlands, instructing his sister Anna (Bamie) to open up his new home in Oyster Bay, New York. As instructed by her brother, Anna entertained lavishly and often many of the Roosevelts' friends and relatives traveled to Oyster Bay for lengthy stays and all twelve bedrooms were in constant use. This would lead one to believe, knowing the Roosevelts' elegant style of living, that the Oyster Bay home would be fully furnished including, perhaps, the Master Bedroom Suite.

ARTISTIC QUALITIES OF THE MASTER BEDROOM SUITE

To date, it has been thought the woods used for the custom made suite were bird's eye maple veneer over walnut with a secondary wood of ash. This educated guess is due to the fact that if Daniel Pabst and Frank Furness were responsible for the furniture, these were woods they favored for strength, durability and beauty.

Pabst was a believer in the ornamental details of stylized floral designs which were achieved by means of a cameo technique of cutting through bird's eye maple veneer to the walnut underneath. The result was a striking design of contrasting light and dark woods, reminiscent of federal furniture and characteristic of Philadelphia furniture throughout the century.⁷

In order to establish the true identity of the woods, in February 1982, the curator at Sagamore Hill took a sample from a transverse plane at the bottom of the left rear stile of an upholstered side chair. This sample was sent to Mr. R.C. Koppel, Center for Wood Anatomy Research, U.S. Department of Agriculture in Madison, Wisconsin. Sagamore Hill is waiting for the results.*

* Results will be sent for completion of paper as soon as woods are identified.

MASTER BEDROOM SUITE



View of chamber suite - northwest corner of house; second floor

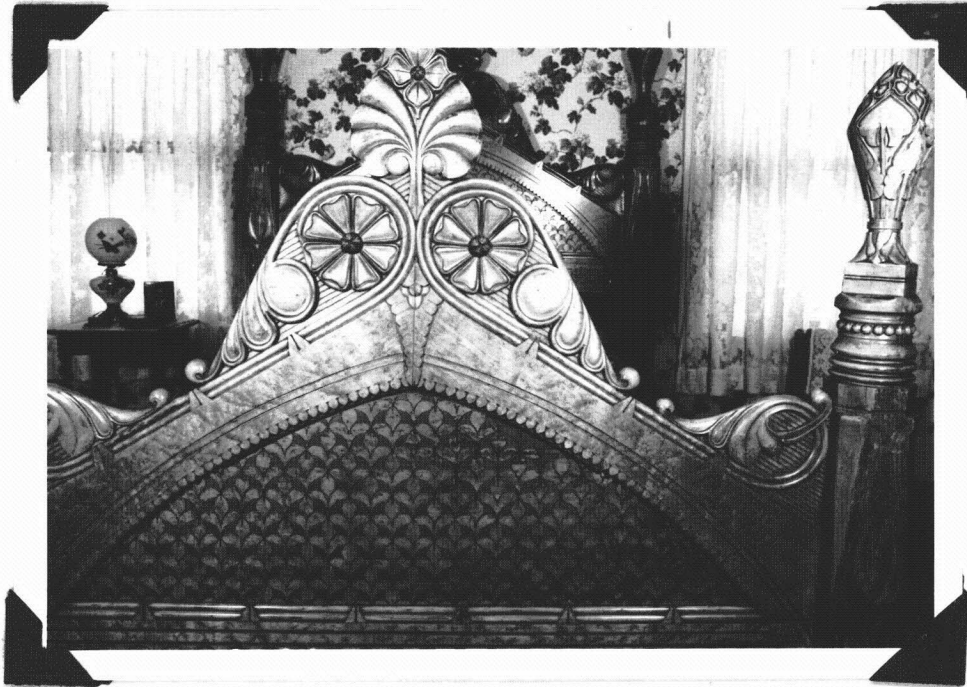


CHAIR

Slanted back posts carved floral pattern; front back and side rails have carved geometric medallions; side rails and side stretchers connected by carved piece; four legs of linear carving; plain floral feet; rear legs canted; two cross stretchers ring and spindle turned; side stretchers ring and spindle turned, slanted upward at corner. One of a pair.

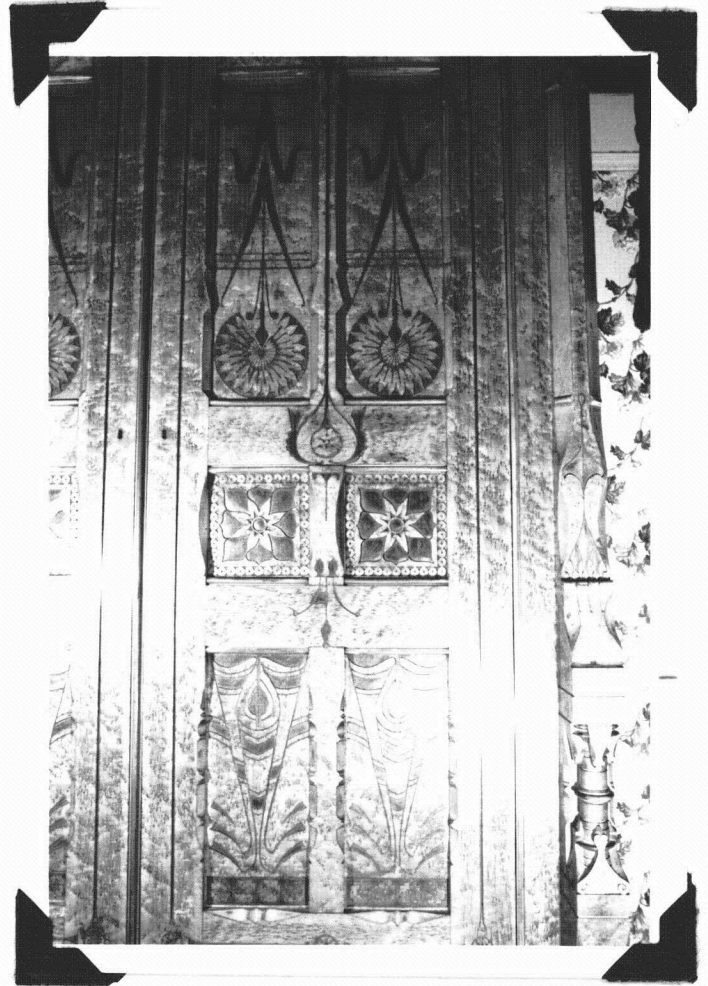
Measurements: height $31\frac{1}{4}$ ", length $27\frac{1}{2}$ ", width $19\frac{1}{2}$ "

MASTER BEDROOM SUITE



BED

Measurements: length 89", baseboard 58", width 72"
 Ornately carved overall in leaf, floral geometric and pleated designs. Headboard; arched with central panel of carved scallop pattern topped in center by two applied carved ornaments of floral and leaf pattern placed side by side and topped with carved leaf and scroll pattern; massive carved back posts with large carved finials. Footboard like headboard except not as high. Carved side boards with carved pleated patterned skirts applied ornaments of leaf and scroll pattern top each sideboard at head.



Wardrobe

Elaborately carved overall; two sections- upper and carcass; double front doors extending from base to top section; pediment has recessed central section and two, small recessed sections forming a leaf pattern; four round scalloped pieces extend across top of pediment; carved floral and scalloped pattern along bottom of pediment; top sides carved scallop and floral design; four corner posts elaborately carved and shaped from top to bottom, front posts extend slightly above top section. Two doors on front, each with recessed pannels.

Measurements: height 103 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", length 72", width 25 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION OF MASTER BEDROOM SUITE

Sagamore Hill is 30 miles east of New York City. The residence is on a hill overlooking Oyster Bay Harbor, which is one half mile from the property.

When Sagamore Hill was built (1884-1885) Theodore Roosevelt wanted his architects to express solidarity. First of all the foundations are 20 inches (50.5 centimeters) thick; joists, rafters and roof boards were in proportion.⁸ This sturdily built home has served to help protect the museum's collection over the years.

The Historic Site was opened to the public in 1953 by the Theodore Roosevelt Association. In 1963 the Association turned Sagamore Hill over to the National Park Service along with a \$500,000. endowment fund.¹

The home is open every day of the year except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years. Visitors are free to wander through the halls. However, there are gates at the entrance of all rooms where the public can view the valuable collections within.

The site maintains a trained curatorial staff who apply the latest technical preservation methods to insure the safety of the museum's resources.

The climate is typical of northern United States. Extremes are great and there is much variability caused by frequent temperature changes. The mean annual temperature ranges from 50⁰ near New York City to 40⁰ in the northern section of the state. The average rainfall is between forty and fortyfive inches increasing toward the north.

In 1978 the park installed a humidifier which is connected to the heating system in the home. It has not functioned properly since its

installation and as a result has adversely affected the condition of the artifacts..

The Regional office has been appraised of the situation and is in the process of evaluating the climate control system.

HYGROTHERMOGRAPH

A hydrothermograph is placed in the Master Bedroom four times a year. An average reading during the winter months in 1978 showed temperature readings of 65.2⁰, relative humidity 40.6%. After the humidifier was installed, readings taken at the same time of the year showed an average temperature of 63⁰, relative humidity 30.7%, sometimes the humidity recordings were as low as 20-25%. With a proper operation of the system both temperature and relative humidity could be stabilized to temperatures between 65⁰-70⁰ and relative humidity 40 - 50 %. A sling psychrometer was purchased by the park in 1981 to check the accuracy of the readings.

The condition of the Master Bedroom furniture is considered "Fair to Poor". Over the years, some agents of deterioration to the furniture have been the extremes in temperature and relative humidity, natural aging, ultraviolet light, certain polishes applied to the pieces and careless handling.

There is a slight bloom covering the surface of all pieces. Scratches appear on all the furniture. Showing the most damage are the bed and the wardrobe. There are moderate checks on the dexter bedposts, sinister side of the footboard and sinister side of the headboard. Extreme splits are evident at the bottom of the sinister bedposts and footboard, also at base of dexter bedposts. Further examination shows marked to extreme checks on wardrobe, especially on bottom dexter side (bottom left and bottom right), top dexter side (top right and top left), top dexter side, extreme right, top down to center (corner post), dexter side, top front of corner

post, also sinister side (bottom right), and top of front corner post.⁹

All of the furniture shows discoloration. The dressing table and wardrobe stood in other rooms until the home was opened to the public in 1953. All pieces were exposed to ultraviolet light from either the southwest or northeast. Six years ago a UV filter was applied to all windows in the home. In the Master Bedroom, there are window shades which are drawn halfway. There is one small bedside lamp (25 watt incandescent light) which remains on all day and is shut off at night by a timer.

Adding to the discoloration of the furniture has been the use of various furniture polishes over the years such as lemon oil, Pledge and Endust.

There is no record of any restoration of the Master Bedroom Suite. In 1981 the National Park Service received funds from the Theodore Roosevelt Association (which is still very involved in maintaining the museum's collection). These funds are to be used specifically for the restoration of the Suite.

According to the superintendent of the site, a furniture conservator has evaluated the pieces. Other furniture conservators will be consulted before the project is contracted.

Sagamore Hill is most fortunate to have such a wide ranged collection of magnificent artifacts, among these the Master Bedroom furniture. The Bedroom Suite is a masterpiece of its time. A growing interest in the Victorian period has contributed to more extensive research. Hopefully, in the near future our educated guesses regarding this distinctive group of furniture will be superceded by verification of its origin, history and composition.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 - Hanks (Arts & Antiques), 100
- 2 - McCullough, 165
- 3 - Ibid, 136
- 4 - Ibid, 135
- 5 - Roosevelt Letters, 8
- 6 - Morris, Sylvia, 176
- 7 - Hanks & Talbot, Bulliten, 16
- 8 - Hagadoren & Roth, 11
- 9 - Jonassen, condition work sheet, 3; 4, 5

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Hanks, David, Art News, Philadelphia Furniture in the 1870's, Adecade of reform, no date, pgs 1-7.

Hanks, David, Talbot, Page, Bulletin, Philadelphia Vol 73, No 316, April, 1971, Daniel Pabst, Cabinet Maker, pgs 1-21.

Hanks, David, Bulletin, Philadelphia, Frank Furness, Vol 74, No 323, September, 1978, pgs 17-22.

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Roosevelt, Theodore, Sr., Letter to Theodore Roosevelt, Mornings on Horseback, pg. 165.

Kennedy, Patricia, Letter to David Hanks, New York, September, 1981.

Hanks, David, Letter to Patricia Kennedy, Sagamore Hill, October, 1981.

Merritt, Christopher, Letter to Center for Wood Anatomy Research, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Madison, Wisconsin, January, 1982.

INTERVIEWS

Superintendent, Loretta Schmidt, Sagamore Hill NHS, Oyster Bay, NY; Christopher Merritt, present Curator, Sagamore Hill NHS; Gary Roth, former Curator, Sagamore Hill NHS (1977-1981); Jessica Kraft, former Curator, Sagamore Hill NHS, (1953-1976); Isa Strubel and Mary Burhans, Museum Aids, Sagamore Hill NHS; David McCullough, (Mornings on Horseback); David Hanks, former Curator of American Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art; John Gable, PHD, Executive Director, Theodore Roosevelt Association; Mary Heming, furniture Conservator; Willy Stein, Park Technician, Sagamore Hill NHS.

GLOSSARY

Bloom - a whitish powdery deposit or coating

Check - to crack or split, (usually in small checks)

Dexter - on the right side

Sinister - on the left side

