

Theodore Roosevelt
Birthplace

THRB.001 c2

CRBIB#460167

PROPERTY OF LIBRARY 420/135813

DIVISION OF CULTURAL

RESOURCES, NARO

D-6215MASI

February 18, 1977

Memorandum

To: Regional Director, North Atlantic Region
From: Superintendent, Manhattan Sites
Subject: Refurbishing Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace

The Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace is, as you know, a reconstruction which was completed in October, 1923. Based on the recollections of then living members of Theodore Roosevelt's family, the house was also carefully furnished at that time. Unfortunately, no formal furnishing plan was then drawn up, nor did the National Park Service remedy this situation when it took over administration of the Birthplace in the early 1960s.

Research by our curator has succeeded in turning up all of the documentation of the 19th century Birthplace's appearance that guided the 1920s restorers in their efforts to accurately recreate the setting of Theodore Roosevelt's youth. It has thus become evident that extensive changes have been affected in the Birthplace's furnishings over the past few decades which have violated the historic integrity of the home and which, therefore, should never have been carried out. In addition to this, it has become clear that in a few instances those in charge of the original restoration of the 1920s did not precisely follow the family recollections in their possession.

It is our intention to now restore the Birthplace to its proper appearance using family notes and photographs of the original installations as our guides. Funding for the project in the amount of \$76,704.75 has been allocated from restricted endowment funds with the approval of the Theodore Roosevelt Association. This figure is based on two preliminary reports on the project which are attached. A third and final report, which will be a fully documented Furnishing Study and Plan combined, is now being prepared and will be completed in the near future. A further request for \$5,000 to construct a hardwood floor

in the Library is being sent concurrently.

In the meantime, it is the consensus of Ed Kallop, Blaine Cliver and Ricardo Torres-Reyes that your office be informed of three minor, non-irreversible changes to the fabric of the building which will take place during the refurbishing. They are as follows:

1. The wallpapers which were changed in 1955 will be replaced by reproductions of those hung in 1923. The Birge Wallpaper Company in Buffalo has located samples of all the original papers with the help of photographs supplied by the Park Service and will remanufacture these papers for us.
2. A wood floor will be installed in the Library to permit the laying of a Turkish Carpet in place of the wall to wall carpeting now covering the concrete floor. The original restorers of the Birthplace undoubtedly neglected to place a Turkish Carpet in the room, as remembered by the family, due to a shortage of cash.
3. On the outside of the building, the bronze railings will be painted black to bring them into line with the black painted cast-iron railings universally used in 19th-century New York City. The only reason bronze was used in 1923 rather than historically correct black painted cast-iron is that bronze was thought to be more durable.

The plans for these and all other aspects of the refurbishing have been reviewed and endorsed by three experts in the field of 19th century American furnishings, whom were called in to assist with the project. Their letters of recommendation are appended to the November 20, 1976 report attached for your reference.

The project is scheduled for completion in the first week of June, 1977. Please let me know if you have any questions concerning our intentions in this matter.

Enclosure

Robert Nash

cc

Reg: Museum Curator, NAR, w/enc.

Curator, MASI, w/enc.

FOLLOW-UP REPORT
ON THE PROPOSED RESTORATION OF THE PERIOD ROOMS IN
THE THEODORE ROOSEVELT BIRTHPLACE

BY DAVID M. KAHN, CURATOR, MANHATTAN SITES, N.P.S.

PRESENTED FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF
THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
THE THEODORE ROOSEVELT ASSOCIATION
NOVEMBER 20, 1976

At the August 17, 1976, meeting of the Executive Committee of the Theodore Roosevelt Association, the National Park Service sought the Association's endorsement of a \$76,704.75 expenditure from the endowment funds. The funds were to be used to accomplish a much needed refurbishing of the period rooms of the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace. After lengthy discussion, the Committee decided to support the Park Service's request, especially in so far as the funds were to be applied towards the cleaning and repairing of furniture, clocks, picture frames, etc. At the same time, however, members of the Committee made it clear that they questioned one of the primary goals of the Park Service's refurbishing proposal, which was to restore the Birthplace to its appearance at the time of its initial restoration in 1923. As this would be a costly undertaking and would involve altering the present decor by installing copies of the 1923 wallpapers, draperies, etc., the Committee thought it best to reserve judgement on these expenditures until the Park Service could present firm historic justification for such a course of action.

The hesitation by some members of the Committee to endorse the Park Service's proposal to model the present restoration after the 1923 installation stemmed from doubts as to how successfully the initial restoration reproduced the 1860s home of the Roosevelt family. It was suggested at the Committee's meeting that the

attitude towards a historic restoration in the 1920s may have been somewhat less scholarly than our own, while the fact that the 1923 restoration was based on fifty-year-old recollections of Theodore Roosevelt's family members may have opened the way for countless inaccuracies to have crept into the installation. Therefore it was suggested by members of the Committee that further research might yield more solid information about the 19th-century house that could be used as a guide in the present restoration effort. Or, in lieu of such information, one could still "correct" the present decor if need be by effecting changes based on our understanding of 19th-century design principles.

To begin with, no contemporary source material on the Roosevelt house is known to exist. There are no photographs of the 19th-century interiors that have come down to us. Nor are there any samples of fabric, wallpapers, or carpeting. No family account books covering the Roosevelts' 1854-1872 stay in the house are known, and no 19th-century descriptions of the house have come to light. Theodore Roosevelt himself makes a few references to his birthplace in his autobiography. But other than these short notes, there is virtually no information on the 19th-century appearance of the house which does not find its source in the 1920s recollections of people who were familiar with the house in their youth.

Indeed, this lack of source material was precisely the situation that the Decoration Committee of the Women's Roosevelt Memorial Association (WRMA) was forced to grapple with back in the 1920s.

The most sensible course that was open to them at the time was to solicit information about the house from those who had seen it, and then base the restoration on that information.

It would be logical to assume, then, that the recollections of Theodore Roosevelt's family members should serve as our guide to the appearance of the original Birthplace. Unfortunately, the family recollections about the Birthplace that were available in 1923 are not available to us today. Books by or about Roosevelt family members reveal, like Theodore Roosevelt's autobiography, only a few facts about the house. The detailed information that was used to restore it originally instead found its source in notes which were taken during interviews held with family members in the 1920-1923 period. Only a few of these notes are known to us today, some of these having been discovered since the initial refurbishing proposal was placed before the Committee in August (more about these newly discovered notes will be said below). The majority of the notes have vanished over the years, as has the master furnishing plan for 1923 which was written by Mrs. Lambert of the WRMA Decoration Committee.

In short, we have no 19th-century source material on the original appearance of the Birthplace to work with, and only a fraction of the secondary material obtained in the 1920s. Under the circumstances, the elements of the 1923 installation have become the most extensive historic document available today on the appearance of the 19th-century house. It is for this reason that the Park Service would like to follow the 1923 installation in the present

restoration effort.

In spite of our shortage of written documentation, there are two ways in which the reliability of the 1923 installation can be confirmed or denied. In the few instances where we do have Roosevelt family notes on the original appearance of the Birthplace, these notes can, of course, be compared with the original installation. Furthermore, it is possible to evaluate how thoroughly the 1923 installation taken as a whole reflects 19th-century principles of design. The latter proposition will be dealt with first as the former is, surprisingly, rather complicated.

In order to determine the accuracy of the 1923 installation in recreating an 1860s setting, and to obtain expert opinions on the National Park Service's restoration proposal for the Birthplace, three leading consultants in the field of 19th-century furnishings were called in. The consultants were Joseph T. Butler of Sleepy Hollow Restorations, Kenneth L. Ames of The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, and Dianne H. Pilgrim of the Brooklyn Museum. Their letters of recommendation are reproduced in toto in Appendixes I, II and III. Essentially, the consensus of the consultants was that virtually all elements of the 1923 decor were in keeping with 19th-century practice. They did not feel the same way about the alterations in the decor of the Birthplace introduced in the 1940s-1960s, and concurred with the Park Service's proposal to remove them. It was suggested by one of the con-

sultants, Dr. Ames, that some articles might be added to the period rooms to liven them up somewhat. But on the whole, the consultants opined that it would be proper to emulate the 1923 installation in the present refurbishing effort.

In regard to how closely the 1923 installation corresponds to the few surviving notes we have on the original house's appearance, we can state that the two correspond beautifully in spirit if not always in details. The discrepancies between the two might be accounted for by there having been limitations in funding in 1923, or simply the impossibility of locating certain articles for the installation. We are not in a position, however, to act on all of the information contained in the notes and "correct" the 1923 installation to conform with them. For in many cases we lack sufficient information to go on.

For example, Theodore Roosevelt's sister, Mrs. Cowles, stated in March 1923 that the curtain tiebacks, door knobs and chandelier mounts in the parlor were silver finished. Unlike the door knobs and chandelier mounts, the curtain tiebacks installed in 1923 were gilt finished. Why the discrepancy? This is hard to say. The pier glass that the tiebacks abut is gilded, as is the over-mantel mirror. It is possible that the mirrors originally in the room were made of rosewood as was the rest of the furniture, in which case silver tiebacks next to a rosewood mirror would make decorative sense. But we do not know what the original mirrors were made of, so we would hardly be justified in supplying the room

with rosewood mirrors to "match" the silver tiebacks that we know were there. Another possibility is that silver tiebacks were placed next to a gilt pier glass originally. But we cannot justify affecting this unharmonious scheme without knowing specifically that the original pier glass was indeed gilded. This small problem has been gone into in such great detail to demonstrate that in some instances where the details of the 1923 installation do not correspond precisely with family notes, we are simply better off in allowing the details of the 1923 installation to stand as they are. In the case under discussion, what is most important is that tiebacks were placed in the room rather than being left out, and that the entire room is right in spirit.

There are, however, instances in which information contained in the family notes, especially those discovered since the August meeting of the Committee, will be used by the Park Service to alter features of the 1923 installation in the present restoration. For example, the newly discovered notes reveal that there were portiers hanging in the doorway leading from the Library into the Dining Room in addition to those hanging in the doorway from the Library to the Parlor. These portiers will be added to the installation. We have also learned that the table in the center of the Library was covered with a red cloth. This will be supplied. And as one member of the Committee suspected, the fabric originally found in the Parlor of the 19th-century house

was of damask or moreen and not the plain silk used in 1923. A damask will, therefore, be used today.

In addition to this, there are a few ways in which the taste of the 1920s asserted itself in the original installation. The parlor chandelier was, for instance, fitted out with candle-like electrical attachments rather than the glass globes which would have been typical of a gas fixture. Features of the installation such as this will also be altered by the Park Service to conform with 19th-century practice.

This all means, of course, that many details of the refurbishing proposal presented to the Committee in August will have to be changed. Precise facts and figures on a new refurbishing plan are not yet available as, for example, wallpaper samples have not yet been obtained and these are needed before fabrics can be selected, etc. But Mr. John Bryant of the National Park Foundation has informed the Manhattan office of the National Park Service that funds for the entire project should be in hand in a matter of days. In order to facilitate the refurbishing of the Birthplace and allow the National Park Service to meet its June 1, 1977, target date for completion of work, the Executive Committee is being asked to endorse the Park Service's plan to restore the house to its 1923 appearance with the proviso that whenever possible and whenever practicable, the 1923 installation will be altered to conform to newly discovered family recollections or proper 19th-century design principles. A complete furnishing

plan will be submitted to the Committee upon completion in the Spring of 1977.

In conclusion, the National Park Service would like to assure the Committee that every attempt will be made to keep the cost of the revised refurbishing plan within the National Park Foundation's \$76,704.75 appropriation. But there is one area in which the Park Service would like to beg the Committee's indulgence. A letter from Mrs. Cowles to the WRMA dated February 8, 1923, reveals the fact that the Library of the Birthplace originally contained a "handsome Turkish rug in bright blues and greens and soft red, very thick." In other words there was not a wall to wall Wilton carpet in the 19th-century room such as the one laid down in 1923. Replacing the present Wilton with a Turkish carpet will not be an easy procedure. Since Turkish carpets never extend from wall to wall a good bit of flooring would have to show in the Library if one were placed there. Unfortunately, the floors in the period rooms at the Birthplace were never finished. Beneath the present carpeting there is simply concrete. To install a Turkish carpet, therefore, we would first have to lay an appropriate hardwood floor. If the Committee would agree to endorse an additional \$5,000 or so appropriation from the National Park Foundation, a hardwood floor will be laid and a Turkish carpet supplied. Otherwise, the present Wilton, which is not out of character for the period, will be duplicated to prevent our exceeding the budget for the project.

APPENDIX I

JOSEPH T. BUTLER to DAVID M. KAHN
SEPTEMBER 9, 1976



SLEEPY HOLLOW RESTORATIONS

TARRYTOWN, NEW YORK 10591 • TELEPHONE (914) 591-7900

September 9, 1976

Dear Mr. Kahn:

It was a great pleasure to talk to you yesterday about your philosophy concerning the refurbishing of the rooms in the Theodore Roosevelt town house. In my opinion, you are very lucky to have the photographs and post cards which show the house as it looked after the 1923 refurbishing.

As best I can view it, it would seem to me that this period is the best to emulate today. If there were documentary evidence to tell more about the actual appearance of the house I certainly would suggest this, but as there is none the period of "reminiscences" probably has more validity. It would seem to me that it would be a terrible mistake to do a generalized approach to a New York town house which is of course possible when you have this body of information. I was quite impressed by the effort that you have put into discovering sources for the actual materials that are to be replaced in the rooms.

I do hope you will come out this way to see us in the near future.

With every good wish, I am

Yours sincerely,

Joseph T. Butler
Director and Curator
of Collections

JTB:ab

CC: Mrs. Reginald P. Rose

Mr. David M. Kahn, Curator
National Park Service, New York Group
26 Wall Street
New York, New York 10005

APPENDIX II

KENNETH L. AMES to DAVID M. KAHN
SEPTEMBER 28, 1976



September 28, 1976

David M. Kahn
Curator
National Park Service
New York Group
26 Wall Street
New York, New York 10005

Dear Mr. Kahn,

It was a pleasure to visit the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace National Historic Site on September 15. I enjoyed being able to examine the house and its contents thoroughly and extensively and I hope that the occasion was as profitable and informative for you as it was for me.

I should say that I was greatly impressed with your "Proposal for the Restoration of the Period Rooms in the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace," which is a model for clarity and thoroughness. I was gratified that you yourself had studied every object very closely and had prepared a report on its history and present status.

The restoration of the Roosevelt Birthplace is a very knotty problem. The first of the difficulties, of course, stems from the fact that the present structure is not, strictly speaking, the Roosevelt Birthplace but a close duplication of it. This means that in countless little ways there is the possibility that inaccuracies have crept in. Secondly, there is the problem that specific information about the original house in the form of existing verbal documents or photographs is apparently not to be found. This means that great emphasis must be placed on the testimonies of those people who in 1923 were able to recall and discuss the original structure.

It is fitting and appropriate and just plain good judgement to try to retain much of the house as close to the 1923 restoration as possible. In talking about the 1923 restoration, I mean particularly the wallpapers, interior woodwork color and the fabrics. I think it may at different times be possible or even desirable to move, rearrange, add to or subtract from, the furniture and other small articles in the house. By and large, however, the primary and initial impact of a given room comes from the decoration of floors, walls, windows and the coverings on the upholstery. These emphases, as I recall, were among your primary concerns in the proposal. For example, in the treatment of the dining room it seems advisable to use the mirror we encountered in the basement of the house over the mantelpiece so as to increase the feeling of light, color and openness in a room which in many ways is currently fairly deadly. In other cases I think the use or addition of articles which may yet be forthcoming from members

of the family makes perfect sense.

The wallpapers, rugs, window trim and upholstery are the major problem and about this it seems we should make a few points. First, we should reiterate that we know in a direct way very little about the house itself. There are no useful remains of paper, fabric or anything else. The recorded testimony of the women who remember the home seems to be fairly consistent and in general accord with 19th century practice. Because of the association of these women with the house, because of the fact they saw it, knew it and even lived in it, special weight should be placed upon their testimony. If more specific or useful information comes to light at some point I can see a valid argument then for making changes. For the present, however, I'd be most reluctant to arbitrarily adopt fabrics or wall coverings which might seem to be more authentically of the 19th century but do not correlate with the testimony offered about the house.

There seems to be a conflict between the specifics of this house and generalities about the 19th century. Information culled from other houses might be used to corroborate some of the things done in the Roosevelt House but there is a problem in superimposing this kind of information upon a specific example which purports to be the environment of the early days of a significant American figure.

In short, whenever possible, adhere to 1923 restoration as the most reliable documentation available at that time. With this guideline accepted, however, great care should be taken to be certain that the details are as accurate as our information about the 19th century can make them. In this regard I suggest careful examination of illustrations of upholstery hangings (as for example in Samuel Dornsife's article in the Winterthur Portfolio, 10) as well as examination of manners of upholstering. Although it may seem a bit extreme, I would recommend examining old photographs of similar pieces of furniture to be sure that the padding, the contour and even the number of buttons if the piece is tufted, are in the 19th century manner. Look in trade catalogs at The Metropolitan Museum of Art or come to Winterthur to look at some of ours.

I might also add that from a philosophical stance I think it is a dangerous business to be forever altering a structure. A reasonable facsimile of the original ought to be maintained until pretty strong evidence can be marshalled for change. Whimsical alterations of color, texture or fabric may seem inconsequential but they make an important difference in the feeling and atmosphere of an interior space.

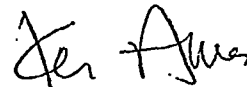
Although we did not discuss this matter at the time, it seems to me that the Roosevelt Birthplace does, however, suffer from a barren or empty feeling. To some extent this was because some of the furniture was away for work. In other cases, this is because of the fact that the 1923 restoration was a 20th century restoration organized by people who were not wholly sympathetic to 19th century ideas about the arrangement of objects. I think the main lines of the restoration are perfectly adequate but I think in the details, specifically the number and placing, there is room for improvement. I realize this is directly related to two things: (1) budget and (2) the matter of association with the family of Theodore Roosevelt. Nonetheless, it might be possible to overcome the second hurdle and use some of the objects which the Park Service holds in some of its storage areas.

Indeed, Mrs. Kahn, I concur with the basic thrust of your proposal and I think it very unwise to sacrifice the Roosevelt House to currently fashionable ideas about Victorian interiors. I think that is bad theory and bad history.

The Roosevelt Birthplace itself, now over half a century old, is history in its own right and although some may be unwilling to think of it in those terms, it is a very significant chapter in the history of historic preservation and historic restoration. It is a distinct disservice to the present and to the future to fiddle with or alter the nature of that house in any significant way other than the few modest suggestions I've already made.

I hope these suggestions are received in the spirit they are offered. As I suggested before, your own work is of the highest order. I hope very much that your supervisors will allow you to proceed with the project you have outlined.

Yours sincerely,

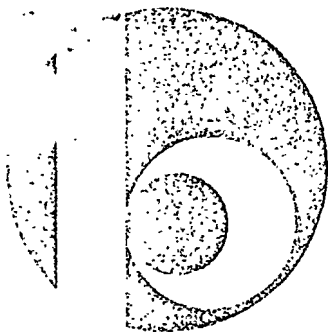


Kenneth L. Ames
Teaching Associate

KLA:kk

APPENDIX III

DIANNE H. PILGRIM to DAVID M. KAHN
SEPTEMBER 30, 1976



THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM • EASTERN PARKWAY • BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11238

September 30, 1976

Mr. David M. Kahn
Acting Curator
National Park Service
Manhattan Sites
26 Wall Street
New York, N. Y. 10005

Dear David:

I very much enjoyed my visit to the Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace. On my last visit over eight years ago, I was so excited about seeing that wonderful set of bedroom furniture that I did not take time to really look at the house. In refurbishing the house you have a big task ahead of you, but one which I feel is long overdue. The changes that occurred in the 1950's now say far more about the '50s than they do about the 1860's. It seems to me that the original intention of creating an 1860's interior has been largely erased.

I agree wholeheartedly with your decision to go back to the way the house appeared in 1923. The Birthplace, is, after all, a memorial to Theodore Roosevelt that was built in 1923, and that fact is important to remember. Without adequate documentation as to how the house actually looked when Roosevelt was a child, it seems to me that the next best thing is to rely on the recollections of Mrs. Cowles and Mrs. Robinson. Indeed, the women of the Theodore Roosevelt Association should be extremely proud of the job they did in 1923. Their re-creation of an 1860's interior was remarkably accurate both in fact and in spirit.

The only aspect of their installation that is somewhat out of keeping is the plain blue fabric on the furniture and windows in the parlor. More than likely in the 1860's the fabric would have had some pattern.

I am impressed with the thoroughness of your research and the proposal which you put together on the house's restoration. I must say that any refurbishing project is difficult with serious responsibilities. My own work on the Trippe and Corbin houses here at Brooklyn has more than heightened my awareness of the problems involved. I anxiously look forward to seeing the house when it is completed.

DHP. m

Sincerely yours,



Dianne H. Pilgrim
Curator

Department of Decorative Arts