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**THE WILCOX MANSION BECOMES AN INAUGURAL SITE:  
AN ORAL HISTORY**

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President, Theodore Roosevelt  
Inaugural Site Foundation  
October 26, 1983

Congressman and Mrs. Dulski, Mr. and Mrs. Jaeckle, Herb Cables, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

For the past five years it has been my privilege to serve with my fellow trustees in the effort to preserve and enhance the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site. It will now be my honor to share with you a brief outline of its colorful and important history.

To understand this history and how the Wilcox Mansion became a national historic site, we should also appreciate how the lives of the two men most prominently associated with the house related to our community, nation and to each other.

Theodore Roosevelt was a soldier, scholar, statesman, author, ornithologist, naturalist, big game hunter, explorer, rancher, husband and father. He was the youngest assemblyman and a candidate for mayor of New York City, Civil Service Commissioner of the United States, Police Commissioner of New York City, and Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He raised and trained a regiment of volunteers, led them in battle, and was nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was a governor of New York, Vice President, and at age 42 the youngest man to become President of the United States.

T.R. built the Panama Canal and the west wing of the White House. He sent the fleet around the world, settled the great coal strike and the Russian-Japanese War. He saved more wilderness than any other president, extended the civil service laws and fought abuses and corruption in business and government.

He was the first president to leave the United States during office, the first to ride in an automobile, fly in an airplane, and go down in a submarine; he was the first to hold regular news conferences and to invite a black person to dine at the White House. He was the first American and first president to receive the Nobel Peace prize.

He advocated women's suffrage, civil rights, economic justice, consumer protection, the right of workers to unionize, military preparedness and strong patriotism.

T.R.'s wisdom still rings true to our ears and hearts: "It is better to wear out than to rust out"; "Speak softly and carry a big stick"; "In life as in football, the principle to follow is hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard."

T.R. was the first modern president and brought the United States into the 20th century, establishing it as a world power with the will to use its might to promote peace. He insisted that while private enterprise should be encouraged, it should not override the public interest. There is hardly any major government program today that was not first conceived, advocated or enacted by T.R.

The Presidency was the pinnacle of T.R.'s career, and since it began in Buffalo at the Wilcox Mansion on September 14, 1901, it is fitting that we recall how this historic event came to pass and how the Mansion was saved as an important shrine of American history.

It has been said that T.R. was a man of destiny. Perhaps, then, it was by more than chance that he came to Ansley Wilcox's home to take the oath of office following President McKinley's death.

An outstanding example of Greek Revival architecture in the United States, the Mansion was originally designed by General Winfield Scott as the home of the commanding officer of the Buffalo Barracks built by the Army in 1838 for the defense of the Niagara Frontier. General Scott, "Old Fuss and Feathers," who led marines to the Halls of Montezuma ending the Mexican War, was the first occupant of the Mansion. The Mansion's front entrance, originally facing Franklin, was not moved to Delaware Avenue until 1859, but it already had been the home of General Zachary Taylor, hero of Tippicanoe and later president, who entertained many prominent Buffalonians there, including another future president, Millard Fillmore. In all, some 13 presidents, including Abraham Lincoln, have visited the Wilcox Mansion in their lifetimes, and by 1901 Delaware had already become appropriately known as the Avenue of the Presidents.

From its beginning as a center of Buffalo's social life, the Wilcox Mansion was also firmly connected with Buffalo's history. Its chain of title includes the names of many founders of our community, including Ebenezer Walden, our first mayor -- Pratt, Allen, Fillmore, Masten and Rumsey -- and other prominent leaders in business, law and government.

The interests and life events of Ansley Wilcox and Theodore Roosevelt also have striking parallels. Both men had Georgian roots; both were honors graduates, Wilcox from Yale and Roosevelt from Harvard; both studied law, but only Wilcox became a member of the Bar. Their first wives both died tragically following the birth of their first child, both daughters.

Ansley Wilcox first became acquainted with then Assemblyman Roosevelt and moved into 641 Delaware in 1883. That year T.R. had his first experience in the Badlands of the Dakota Territory, where a year later he established a new special home of his own, the Elkhorn Ranch.

Wilcox had been a supporter of Governor Cleveland during Cleveland's political days in Buffalo, and later supported him for president. In 1884 T.R., as the Republican leader of the New York Assembly, worked with Cleveland's Democrats to pass the state's first civil service law. T.R. became a leader in civil service reform, serving for six years from 1889 to 1895 under both presidents Harrison and Cleveland, as one of the most active civil service commissioners the nation has ever seen. Civil service reform was also a cause to which Wilcox was devoted throughout his life. During this same period

Wilcox was a founder of the National Civil Service Reform League, which supported many of Commissioner Roosevelt's policies. It seems more than coincidence, then, that in 1890 Ansley Wilcox successfully argued a case from Buffalo in New York's highest court upholding the constitutionality of the civil service reform law that Assemblyman Roosevelt helped to enact seven years earlier.

Both men were also active in preserving natural wilderness for future generations. Appointed in 1883 as the attorney for the Niagara State Park Commission, Wilcox succeeded in acquiring all the land necessary to complete the park. At this time T.R. was in the Dakota Territory learning of the threatened loss of our wildlife and natural areas.

Ansley Wilcox and T.R. were also committed to municipal government reform. While an Assemblyman, Roosevelt supported enactment of reform measures for New York City. In 1894 a state constitutional amendment separating municipal from state and federal elections advocated by Ansley Wilcox was adopted. The next year, T.R. became the reform police commissioner of New York City.

During this period a new addition to the Wilcox Mansion was designed by architect George Cary, who also designed the New York State Building at the Pan-American Exposition, now the home of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

T.R. was already well acquainted with Buffalo before the events of September, 1901. He and Ansley Wilcox had been McKinley supporters in the 1896 election, and T.R. had spoken in Buffalo many times. As vice president, T.R. had opened the Pan-American Exposition in May, 1901 hurrying back to Buffalo after learning that McKinley had been shot. Wilcox met T.R. upon his arrival, and offered him the hospitality of his home, where T.R. stayed for four days while physicians administered to the wounded president. When T.R. returned on September 14, 1901 it was not surprising, then, that he came to the Wilcox Mansion to take the oath of office, and where he met with the cabinet and signed his first proclamation.

After a spectacular and kaleidoscopic career, T.R. died in his sleep in 1919 at Sagamore Hill. Vice President Marshall said at the time, "Death had to take him sleeping, for if Roosevelt had been awake, there would have been a fight."

Ansley Wilcox remained active in community affairs, helping to form the predecessor organization of the United Way and organizing Buffalo's local Red Cross chapter in his home. After his death in 1930 and the death of his wife in 1934, unsuccessful attempts were made to preserve the house as a memorial.

Although an important era of the Mansion's history had closed, the public spirit infused there during Ansley Wilcox's lifetime was destined to give a dramatic rebirth to the Mansion.

From 1939 to 1959 the house served as a restaurant, the Kathryn Lawrence Tea Room. But in October, 1961, after the restaurant closed, a local company leased the property with the intention of demolishing the house to develop a parking lot. Spurred by public reaction, community leaders called for the Mansion's preservation. The Buffalo Evening News editorial of October 24, 1961 spoke for many in these words: "A historic treasure, once demolished, cannot be replaced. Surely there must be enough civic imagination in Buffalo to keep this monument of Buffalo's past."

The editorial was prophetic. On October 26, 1961, a delay in the planned demolition was negotiated by Dr. Julian Park, then President of the Buffalo Historical Society. Local groups including the Girl Scouts and a committee of architects led by Mr. Olaf Shelgren mobilized to find ways to preserve the Mansion. Early in 1962 a bill was introduced by Buffalo Congressman Thaddeus J. Dulski at the request of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society to authorize acquisition of the property by the National Park Service. Support came from the Buffalo Common Council, the New York State Historical Association, Buffalo Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution. Congressman Dulski urged the House of Representatives Interior and Insular Affairs Committee to make an inspection of the Mansion to gain a fuller appreciation of its historical significance. But since legislation was then pending to make T.R.'s home and birthplace historic sites, the Interior Department initially opposed the Dulski bill as unnecessary, and no action was taken that year.

Undaunted, Congressman Dulski reintroduced his bill and in June of 1963 succeeded in arranging for the subcommittee to conduct hearings on his bill in Buffalo. Led by Congressman Dulski and representatives of the Historical Society, County government, the Rotary Club, and the Junior Chamber of Commerce, sixteen witnesses testified in favor of the bill. All of the committee members, including Congressman Hugh L. Carey, a future Governor, gave the proposal a strong endorsement.

To gain favorable congressional action, community support for the Wilcox Mansion was organized by the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Committee, then chaired by Frank D. Leavers, and sponsored by the Greater Buffalo Development Foundation, the Buffalo Area Council, Boy Scouts of America and the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Even the Young Democrats showed their support by organizing a Hike for History up Delaware Avenue to the Mansion of over 200 Western New Yorkers to urge congressional action.

But Congress did not act immediately and it was soon announced that demolition of the Wilcox Mansion was again imminent. But destiny intervened, this time through the civic spirit of Mr. E. Perry Spink, President of Liberty National Bank and Trust Company. At the urging of his friend Edgar T. Drullard, himself a strong Wilcox preservation leader, Mr. Spink arranged for the bank to purchase the property in November, 1963, giving more time for the community and Congress to act.

And Congress did act, passing in 1966 Congressman Dulski's bill authorizing acquisition of the property and declaring the Wilcox Mansion a national historic site.

But with the enactment came yet a new challenge since, although the legislation provided funds for both acquisition and restoration, it conditioned their release on the community raising an equal amount of \$250,000. If anyone thought this would present an insurmountable obstacle for Buffalo, they were mistaken, for what followed was possibly the most comprehensive and enthusiastic outpouring of civic energy, spirit and pride ever witnessed in Buffalo, or any other American city.

Literally every segment of the community -- business, labor, media, government, service organizations, cultural and patriotic groups, civic clubs, individuals from all walks of life -- volunteered their time, donated services, gave money or appropriated funds. To coordinate these efforts the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site Foundation was formed in 1967 by the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society under the leadership of Owen Augspurger, who also personally organized a local Rough Riders Association as a way of raising funds for the project.

It was the first time in memory that Buffalo had so enthusiastically supported a community cause and was probably the beginning of the city's historic preservation effort which has since become an integral part of the area's development program. In the words of Frank Leavers, past president of the Inaugural Site Foundation: "For some reason it became a labor of love."

And a labor of love it was as Buffalo met the new challenge. The Junior League pledged \$50,000 and Senator Bill Adams obtained a state appropriation of \$87,000 to match local gifts. Both newspapers and every leading bank were major donors. Labor, materials and service poured in. The Federated Garden Clubs restored the grounds. Harry Frank General did maintenance at cost; union painters generously gave 350 hours of time using paint donated by Pratt and Lambert to help redecorate the house. Birge Wallpaper donated specially reproduced historic wallpaper and installation. Weiner Metal and Roofing provided new roofing materials, the Oil and Heating Institute donated fuel oil for the winter of 1964. Stanley Steel, National Gypsum and Sterling Glass gave materials for urgently needed repairs, while Frey Electric and William Kimmins Company performed the necessary skilled work without charge.

It seemed like everyone in Buffalo had become involved. No group, business or individual refused to help. Thirty donors gave \$500 each. At one point, \$185,000 was raised in 60 days. The news media covered these early efforts fully and have continued to keep the community well informed about the growth of the new Inaugural Site.

With the required \$250,000 in local support secured, in 1969 the Park Service purchased the property, making the Mansion an official part of the National

Park Service, but without any federal money to operate it and on a condition in the enabling act that if local operating funds were ever insufficient, the property could be sold and the proceeds turned over to a federal irrigation fund.

Again the community responded. The county legislature voted financial support, school groups collected money, Junior Achievers staffed a booth to receive contributions at the M&T Plaza, the Erie County Historical Federation manned a booth at the Erie County Fair, and the Owen Augspurgen Memorial Fund raised \$2000 after Mr. Augspurgen's untimely death. Western New York Nurserymen donated services and materials for the garden restoration. The local Garden Clubs made and donated flower arrangements, which together with the volunteered participation of musical groups, local historians, antique doll societies and the Buffalo Jaynees, helped to establish the Site's superb Victorian Christmas as an important source of operating funds.

By the fall of 1970 with the necessary money raised, restoration work began, so that on September 14, 1971 the Inaugural Site was opened to the public. Two years later, restoration of the dining room was completed with the assistance of the volunteers.

In 1976 the stair runner near the Mansion's front entrance was needlepointed in the eagle pattern of President Hayes' official chinaware by the Buffalo Chapter of the Embroiderers Guild of America as their bicentennial gift. Each of the 18 stairs and risers took individual needlepointers 400 hours to complete.

The Site's volunteers in 1979 designed and installed an authentic Victorian herb garden to help beautify the grounds and provide a source for revenue from herb sales.

With a \$5,000 grant from the Theodore Roosevelt Association, a bedroom restoration was exquisitely coordinated by a committee of volunteers and opened in September, 1981, with the dedication attended by members of the Association's Executive Committee and Tweed Roosevelt, T.R.'s grand nephew.

The volunteers and trustees work tirelessly to improve the Site in countless ways. From the very essential fundraising projects, to obtaining significant donations of outdoor lighting which dramatically illuminates the Mansion at night, as well as a continuing program to acquire original Wilcox furnishings, now in excess of 200 items, and to increasing the Site's historical collection to more than 50,000 artifacts, few local programs are as blessed with such loyal and effective volunteers as the Inaugural Site. They are indeed the heartbeat of the house.

That same community spirit has continued. Last year 170 volunteers from every part of our community, including local architects preparing restoration plans, donated some 35,000 hours of service to keep Western New York's only national Historic Site alive.

Keeping the Inaugural Site open and fiscally sound throughout its early years was not an easy task. But with continuing aid from county government, assistance from city government at critical times, much appreciated aid from the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, individual contributions, and the tireless fund raising of our dedicated volunteers, the Site has persevered.

There remained, however, a great need to provide long-term financial stability for the Site, to extend its educational and cultural value to the community and to continue its restoration. At the request of the Inaugural Site's Trustees, Congressman Henry J. Nowak took up that challenge and, after three years of skillful legislative work, a new enabling act, allowing direct federal assistance for the Inaugural Site on a shared basis with the local community, became law in December, 1980. As a result, the Inaugural Site is now unique within the Park Service, receiving technical assistance and funds for vitally-needed physical improvements, as well as for operating expenses, while remaining under local direction.

With this key development in the Inaugural Site's history, additional restoration can now be planned and the educational and cultural benefits of the Site fully realized.

Was it worth the effort? For the answer, come to a Victorian Christmas at the Mansion and experience the high school chorale groups singing Christmas caroles as volunteers wearing period dress from the renowned costume collection serve hot mulled cider to hundreds of guests. See the expressions of delight by the scores of youngsters at the Teddy Bear picnics and sense the new awareness of an important time in American and Buffalo history in the questions of hundreds of students who yearly tour the Site. Participate in the architectural walking tours conducted by the volunteers, attend a quilt show and observe Buffalonians taking pride in their heritage. Or join the 23,000 visitors to the Mansion who last year learned about T.R. and the Mansion's history from its knowledgeable and gracious docents.

In short, a visit to the Wilcox Mansion today will convince you that it is one of the most popular and successful historic sites in our nation and has again become the focus for community life and activities, just as it was throughout its history.

Ansley Wilcox was a man of dedicated community involvement. Theodore Roosevelt was a man of vision and action in the public interest. The spirit of both men converged in the house at 641 Delaware at a critical time in our nation's history. Their spirit lives on in the hearts and minds of countless Buffalonians, past and present, whose devotion has made the Inaugural Site a



shining example of what this community can accomplish when it works together.

On behalf of the members and volunteers of the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site Foundation, its officers and trustees, allow me to express to all those who have helped to preserve the Inaugural Site, our thanks for a job well done. It was indeed a labor of love and one that will be appreciated by generations of Americans to come. Or as T.R. might have said: Bully for Buffalo and Bully for you.



THEODORE ROOSEVELT INAUGURAL SITE FOUNDATION, INC.

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TO: All Trustees  
FROM: L. G. Foschio  
DATE: November 7, 1983

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I thought you might like to have a personal copy of the enclosed.

L.G.F.