

## **The Roosevelt Presidential Library: A Shift in Commemoration**

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On April 12, 1937, Franklin D. Roosevelt made a sketch of the first federally administered presidential library, a new kind of institution that shifted presidential commemoration into the realms of the archive and museum. Roosevelt drew a two-story Dutch-colonial style building faced in stone with a full-length porch, small windows, and a steeply pitched roof, like the houses he remembered from his childhood in New York State (figures 1 and 2). He labeled the two views "Ground Plan" and "Front Elevation," and signed the drawing with a flourish, "FDR."<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt had collected many things since his childhood, from books to stuffed birds, from model ships to millions of government documents relating to his public service. As a student of history, he knew the danger of leaving the fate of these collections to chance. They needed an archive in order to remain intact after his death and thereby remain a testament to his life. To appeal to the public, FDR wanted a tourist-friendly history museum to be part of his library, and he hoped that it would draw "an appalling number of sightseers."<sup>2</sup>

On viewing Egypt's pyramids during the Second World War, Roosevelt commented that "man's desire to be remembered is colossal,"<sup>3</sup> and what he observed about the pharaohs was true of himself. Roosevelt so desired to be remembered, and to be remembered in a particular way, that he altered the essential terms of commemoration for the American presidency. No previous president had presumed to memorialize himself; self-aggrandizing monuments were thought to be for monarchs, not the elected leader of the United States. Ameri-

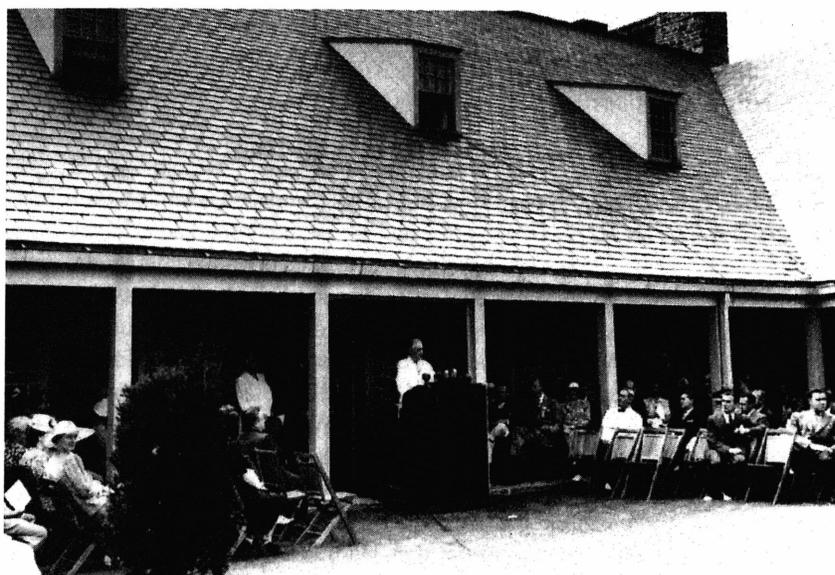


**Figure 1:** President Roosevelt with a plan for the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, 1939. *Courtesy of the Roosevelt Library.*

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can leaders submitted their bid for immortality to posterity, and some were commemorated with statues, preserved homes, obelisks, and even temples, while others within a few generations were nearly obliterated from public memory. Never before had a president designed his own national memorial. Compared in size to the monuments with which previous leaders in world history have been commemorated, the Roosevelt Library is relatively modest. But it was audacious in its ambition to preserve not just the Roosevelt name, but also a narrative of the man's life, and a vast variety of relics for as long as the United States remains in existence.<sup>4</sup>

Roosevelt's library, the first federal presidential library, set a precedent. Currently ten presidential libraries run by the National Archives and Records



**Figure 2:** Roosevelt speaking at the opening ceremony at the Roosevelt Library, 1940. *Courtesy of the Roosevelt Library.*

Administration draw thousands of scholars and over a million tourists each year.<sup>5</sup> The eleventh, the William Jefferson Clinton Library in Little Rock, Arkansas, is under construction and scheduled to open in 2004. The national cultural impact of the presidential library today directly flows from Roosevelt's plans for self-commemoration.

As an intervention in public memory, the presidential library functions in several ways. For tourists, a presidential library presents an ideologically charged narrative that valorizes a presidential life. Informing and validating a presidential library's museum are archives that preserve documents and other presidential possessions as national relics. Finally, presidential libraries through their sites project an aura of the sacred by entwining an individual's life with national history to create a narrative circuit that concludes with a presidential grave. Presidential libraries as institutions help create narratives about national history not only through their sites and museums, but through the accessibility of their archives. This accessibility, as will be seen, Roosevelt secretly hoped to prevent even as he publicly brought it about.

Sites of memory, like presidential libraries, have come under increasing scrutiny by scholars who examine the landscape of public memory.<sup>6</sup> As John Bodnar has written, "Public memory is produced from a political discussion that involves . . . fundamental issues about the entire existence of a society: its organization, structure of power, and the very meaning of its past and present."<sup>7</sup> As sites of memory, presidential libraries have embedded within them an ideol-

ogy that attempts to reify reverence for the presidency. This article explains why and how this new site of memory was created, and examines its cultural effects.

### Presidential Records and Relics

One of FDR's goals in creating a federally administered Roosevelt Library was to escape a pattern of destruction and disbursement that had affected presidential records since George Washington's death. The private ownership of presidential papers was a peculiar national tradition established when Washington, at the end of his second term, shipped all of his documents to Mount Vernon.<sup>8</sup> During retirement, Washington wanted to erect a stone building at Mount Vernon "for the accommodation and security of my Military, Civil and private Papers which are voluminous and may be interesting."<sup>9</sup> Washington had in mind a precursor to the presidential library, but he was unable to carry out his plan, and on his death his papers went to his nephew, Bushrod Washington.<sup>10</sup> Bushrod lent large portions of the papers to Chief Justice of the United States John Marshall, who confessed that after many years they were "extensively mutilated by rats and otherwise injured by damp."<sup>11</sup> The remains of Washington's papers, like the remains of most presidential papers, were eventually purchased by the Library of Congress, but only after many were lost forever. Even some presidential papers that found their way to the Library of Congress had unusual restrictions placed on them. For instance, many of Abraham Lincoln's papers were sealed and unavailable to historians until 1947.<sup>12</sup>

Webb Hayes, the son of late-nineteenth-century President Rutherford B. Hayes, created an institution that provided a model for Roosevelt's library. In 1910, Hayes deeded his parents' 25-acre estate, Spiegel Grove, to the state of Ohio under the condition that "a suitable fireproof building" be erected "for the purpose of preserving and forever keeping" the records and relics of his parents.<sup>13</sup> The Hayes family and the Ohio Legislature provided the money for the neo-classical library, privately administered by the Ohio Historical Society and the Hayes Foundation. Until Franklin Roosevelt, however, no president seems to have looked to the Hayes Library as a model for preserving presidential papers and collections. President Roosevelt instructed the Director of the National Archives, Robert Connor, to investigate the Hayes Library and learned that it was "a veritable gold mine for historical scholars."<sup>14</sup>

Even before Roosevelt investigated the Hayes model, however, I believe two other commemorative events helped shape his vision of presidential commemoration. The first was the founding of the National Gallery of Art by Andrew Mellon, which gave Roosevelt a lesson in how to build an institution from scratch and persuade the federal government to administer it in perpetuity. The second was the controversy surrounding the design and building of the neoclassical Jefferson Memorial, which may have led Roosevelt to create his library outside the capital, using a domestic architectural idiom.

### Mellon's National Gallery and the Jefferson Memorial

Andrew Mellon, treasury secretary for three Republican presidents during the booming 1920s, epitomized the mysteries of public and private finance for that era.<sup>15</sup> At the 1924 Democratic National Convention, Franklin Roosevelt said, "Calvin Coolidge would like to have God on his side, but he *must* have Mellon."<sup>16</sup> When the Great Depression hit, however, Mellon's reputation became as tarnished as it had been bright. His son, Paul Mellon, recalled reading a scrawled poem above a urinal in 1934 that illustrated how far his father's reputation had fallen:

Hoover blew the whistle  
Mellon rang the bell  
Wall Street gave the signal  
And the country went to hell<sup>17</sup>

After Roosevelt became president, his administration launched a highly-publicized investigation into Mellon's taxes, charging that the former Treasury Secretary had violated the very laws he was pledged to uphold. Mellon had for years deducted from his income on his tax returns the purchase prices of many expensive works of art—including paintings by Raphael, Titian, Vermeer, and Rembrandt.<sup>18</sup> Mellon claimed that the prices of his masterpieces could be deducted because the art was officially owned by a non-profit trust.

On December 22, 1936, during the Roosevelt Administration's investigation against him, the 81-year-old Mellon wrote Roosevelt a letter offering to donate his collection to the United States in order to found a "National Gallery of Art." Roosevelt was delighted with Mellon's proposal to give to the nation a priceless art collection, and also pay for the construction of a massive museum in which it and future donations could be displayed. All Mellon wanted in return was for the National Gallery to be supported by annual appropriations from Congress, and to be chartered by the Smithsonian Institution, assuring Mellon a form of immortality. Mellon was later asked why he would give his art collection to the very government that was attacking him. "Every man wants to connect his life with something he thinks eternal," he said.<sup>19</sup>

In a letter marked "Personal and Confidential," Attorney General Homer Cummings told Roosevelt that under the proposal, Mellon's trustees would outnumber government appointees, and would appoint their successors. "The net result is that they will control the management of the Gallery, the site, and the contents thereof for all time. . . . The anomaly is therefore presented of government property being managed by a private group."<sup>20</sup> Roosevelt did not see this concern as serious. In fact, it appears that FDR tried to follow this precedent in creating his presidential library.<sup>21</sup> Cummings also objected that in the proposal "the faith of the United States is pledged" to support the National Gallery. "A question of taste and propriety is raised by this phraseology, but it was a form

insisted upon by Mr. Mellon's attorney."<sup>22</sup> Roosevelt insisted on similar language when he deeded his presidential library to the United States.<sup>23</sup>

While the National Gallery provided Roosevelt with an institutional framework to follow in preserving his collections with assistance from the federal government, the relative failure of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, the last great neo-classical presidential monument built in Washington, may have spurred Roosevelt's presidential library as well. The Jefferson Memorial was authorized by Congress during the height of the New Deal to give Democrats something approaching equal commemorative space with Republican Abraham Lincoln. Designed by John Russell Pope, also architect of Mellon's National Gallery, the Jefferson Memorial was based on ancient Rome's Pantheon, a form particularly suited to the commemoration of the classically minded Jefferson, who had used the domed temple as his model for Monticello.<sup>24</sup>

But while the neoclassic design of the Lincoln Memorial was hailed two decades earlier, many advocates of modern design considered neoclassicism anachronistic in the late 1930s. The *Magazine of Art* criticized Pope's design with an open letter to President Roosevelt:

An enlightened government must realize that the stir which the announcement of the proposed Jefferson Memorial has occasioned, is not due solely to the Jefferson Memorial itself, but is due in large measure to the pent up feeling against a long series of dreary, costly, pretentious, inefficient, and dishonest buildings.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, several of Washington's famous cherry trees had to be destroyed during construction. As a supporter of the Jefferson Memorial and an avid reader of the *New York Times*, FDR was probably chagrined to read on April 8, 1937, as the controversy moved to its height: "Plan for Jefferson Memorial Under Attack; New Site and Design Urged Upon Congress."<sup>26</sup> Although construction of the Jefferson Memorial continued, in spite of stiff opposition, Roosevelt was concerned with how he himself would be commemorated. Four days later, FDR was thinking about a different kind of presidential commemoration as he sketched his library.

### **FDR and the First Presidential Library**

Roosevelt's library was, like the National Gallery, to be privately constructed, but operated by the federal government. In late 1937 Roosevelt asked architect Henry J. Toombs, a personal friend with whom he had previously worked on small architectural projects, to draw up a design based on his sketch for a new building next to his family home at Hyde Park, New York.<sup>27</sup> Toombs soon sent the plans, remarking in the enclosed letter that

I tried to arrange a plan as closely as possible to the plan you sketched for me. . . . The stack area will take care of your files and while it has been very difficult to arrive at the proper amount of exhibition space, I think what I have is about right.<sup>28</sup>

Roosevelt replied that Toombs had not taken into account the number of tourists that would visit the site. FDR thought that in the summer there might be as many as 3,000 visitors a day:

That is an appalling number of sightseers to handle, and these visitors would have to go in and pass through the rooms and exhibition halls and out again on regular tour. That makes me think that what we call a reading room would not be a reading room at all for students but rather a very carefully designed living room which would contain portraits, several of my favorite paintings and perhaps a thousand of my books . . . [with] visitors to pass in one door and out another through an aisle formed by stanchions and ropes. This room, incidentally, I could use myself in the work of preparing the collections during hours when the public was not admitted.<sup>29</sup>

FDR's desire to convert the research room into a display room for paintings and books shows Roosevelt's understanding of the need to appeal to tourists, even if it meant sacrificing facilities for researchers.

Roosevelt understood that most tourists would have little interest in using the archive, even if it was what validated the site and informed the displays. The research room was instead to become a subsidiary presidential workspace, a room where Roosevelt could lavish attention on the objects he proposed to display in the museum and store in the archive. FDR's papers and collections were to be stored mostly out of sight, in a National Archives' repository that was to be part of the building. In terms of display, and thus of the relationship between most visitors and the archive, many of the traces of presidential labor were to be hidden. And the building itself was even larger than it appeared, for Roosevelt as designer had minimized the apparent size of the library by drawing upon domestic architectural metaphors. The Roosevelt Library's design included a full basement and a steeply pitched roof that made it a three-story building of approximately 40,000 square feet—twenty times the size of a comfortable middle-class home.<sup>30</sup> Although no one would easily connect the Roosevelt Library with the overtly magnificent Jefferson Memorial, it was actually larger in square footage.

As important as the public display of his collections and memorabilia was to Roosevelt's plans, the museum alone was not enough to justify creating the first federal presidential library. FDR knew that every government activity re-

quires a coalition of groups who will benefit and will therefore lend political support. After deciding on Hyde Park as the site and himself as master designer, FDR wooed professional historians, perhaps the most important constituency for his plans. One of the first approached was Samuel Eliot Morison, a professor of history at the President's alma mater, Harvard. Roosevelt told Morison that

My own papers should, under the old method, be divided among the Navy Department, the Library of Congress, the New York State Historical Division in Albany, the New York City Historical Society, Harvard University, and various members of my family. . . . If anything is done in the way of assembling a fairly complete collection in one place, the effort should start now, but it should have the sanction of scholars.<sup>31</sup>

Morison replied that he liked the idea for what he called the "New Deal Archives," but still thought that Roosevelt's official state papers should be deposited in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.<sup>32</sup> Roosevelt was undeterred, however, and wrote to another professor that "the creation of a center devoted to the history of this period must have the support of the fraternity of historians."<sup>33</sup>

On July 4, 1938, Roosevelt met at the White House with National Archives Director Robert Connor to enlist help in creating his new institution. Roosevelt told Connor that he had ruled out the Library of Congress and the National Archives for his papers. Moreover, he warned, concentration in Washington could lead to a disaster for national records if war broke out and the capital were attacked. FDR described how the national archives of Spain had been severely damaged during the recent Spanish Civil War, and he related the anxiety French government officials had expressed to him about the concentration of France's national records in Paris with war looming in Europe.<sup>34</sup> Roosevelt proposed constructing a combined archive and museum in Hyde Park with private funds, and then making the building a branch of the National Archives. But to start this process, FDR needed to begin a private fund-raising campaign to build the facility. Well-off though he was, FDR did not have the personal wealth needed to build an impressive memorial. Eventually \$400,000 came from 28,000 donors to build the Roosevelt Library.<sup>35</sup>

The loss of many presidential records, and the limited access granted to some of those that remained, gave Roosevelt a compelling rationale for creating his archive. Professional historians, Roosevelt judged, would come around to his plan if they could be made to see its advantages for their profession. On November 1, 1938, Roosevelt invited a select group of historians and archivists to lunch at the White House on December tenth:

I am asking a small group of people from different parts of the country to come together to discuss with me a matter

which lies very close to my heart. . . . I am enclosing a short and very sketchy memorandum which I hope you will be thinking over.<sup>36</sup>

The two-page single-spaced memorandum that FDR included was actually a detailed summary of the variety of papers and other collections that he had gathered over his life. Roosevelt stated that with the new facility, his collections would remain “whole and intact in their original condition, available to scholars of the future.”<sup>37</sup>

The historians discussed with Roosevelt his planned archive, and after lunch FDR called a press conference to announce his plans. Professor Morison, who had been won over, stood near him to show the historians’ support. Professor Morison said to the press, “President Roosevelt has proposed, for the first time, to keep all of his files intact . . . under the administration of the National Archives so that . . . they will be under public control and will not be subject to dilapidation or destruction or anything else.”<sup>38</sup> The President needed to create this impression to gain press support, which in turn would garner congressional support. On the following day, the *New York Times* headline announced: “ROOSEVELT ESTATE TO HOUSE ARCHIVES, GO TO PUBLIC LATER,” and beneath, “Historians Back Idea.”<sup>39</sup>

Not all reaction was positive, however. The *Chicago Tribune* printed an editorial cartoon captioned, “He Did His Shopping Early,” showing a rotund FDR dressed up as Santa Claus leaving a weighty present in a stocking. The stocking is marked, “Hyde Park Memorial to Franklin D. Roosevelt, to be enlarged by public subscription and forever maintained at government expense. To be grander than Mount Vernon or Monticello.” At the far left of the cartoon FDR as Santa walks away and says, “Won’t he be Surprised—Bless His Heart,” as he looks back at his card, which is engraved “To Pres. Roosevelt from F.D.R.”<sup>40</sup>

Unmoved by the criticism, Roosevelt appointed a committee composed mainly of professors and archivists to make recommendations about the organization of the facility. On December 17, 1938, the committee decided to name the site the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.<sup>41</sup> The term library was chosen over archive because it was thought that it would seem less alien to the public. The Library was to include Roosevelt’s extensive collection of books, but that was only a small portion of its proposed contents. The name was also chosen because of the precedent established by the Rutherford B. Hayes Library. After the morning session, the committee reconvened at the White House for lunch with President Roosevelt. FDR, almost certainly with Andrew Mellon’s National Gallery in mind, wondered if some designation could be found that did not use the Roosevelt name. “What about the Hyde Park Library?” Roosevelt asked, at which some committee members scoffed.<sup>42</sup> FDR eventually agreed to the name “Roosevelt Library” because, as the committee stated, “the President’s personal and official papers . . . constitute the principal reason for establishing the Library.”<sup>43</sup>

A draft of the legislation by the Justice Department establishing the Roosevelt Library as part of the National Archives was submitted to Congress four days after the library committee's first meeting.<sup>44</sup> The legislation languished in Congress for some months, however, and one Republican congressman complained that "only an egocentric maniac would have the nerve to ask for such a measure."<sup>45</sup> Columnist John T. Flynn compared Roosevelt to a glory-mad Egyptian pharaoh, and said FDR wanted a "Yankee Pyramid."<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the legislation finally passed Congress in July of 1939, which at that time had a substantial majority of Democrats in both houses of Congress. Roosevelt, following Andrew Mellon's example, was able to insert language into the bill promising that the federal government would "provide such funds as may be necessary . . . so that the said Library shall be at all times properly maintained."<sup>47</sup>

At the cornerstone-laying ceremony on November 19, 1939 (figure 3), FDR said:

Of the papers which will come to rest here, I personally attach less importance to the documents of those who have occupied high public or private office than I do the spontaneous letters which have come to me . . . from men, from



**Figure 3:** President Roosevelt spreading mortar for the cornerstone laying ceremony of the Roosevelt Library, 1939. *Courtesy of the Roosevelt Library.*

women, and from children in every part of the United States, telling me of their conditions and problems and giving me their own opinions.<sup>48</sup>

Roosevelt did value expressions of popular opinion, but his statement screened his desire to prevent access to many of his own sensitive papers.

We see this in FDR's desire to select his close advisor Harry Hopkins as the Library's first director, which would have given Roosevelt indirect control of his sensitive archival materials. National Archivist Robert Connor wrote in his diary, "Wow! Was that a blow!"<sup>49</sup> Connor convinced the President that an archivist would be better for the position, but only after Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, one of FDR's appointees, warned Roosevelt against choosing a "court historian." Connor instead recommended professional archivist Fred Shipman, and Roosevelt acquiesced. By 1941, when the museum portion of the Roosevelt Library opened to the public, Connor confided in his diary, "The President still thinks of the library as his personal property."<sup>50</sup>

Indeed Roosevelt did. In 1943, he wrote a memo to Director Shipman that revealed his intentions. Roosevelt, like Andrew Mellon with the National Gallery, wanted to exercise some control over his institution even after his death, through people of his own choosing:

Before any of my personal or confidential files are transferred to the Library at Hyde Park, I wish to go through them and select those which are never to be made public. . . . If by reason of death or incapacity I am unable to do this, I wish that function to be performed by a Committee of three, namely, Samuel I. Rosenman, Harry L. Hopkins and Grace Tully, or the survivors thereof.

With respect to the file known as "Famous People File," the same procedure should be followed. Those which are official letters may be turned over to the Library, but those which are in effect personal such as, for example, the long-hand letters between the King of England and myself, are to be retained by me or my Estate and should never be made public.<sup>51</sup>

Roosevelt, five years after he began selling his new institution as an accessible archive, here privately revealed that access to sensitive materials was to be almost the opposite of his public statements. In 1947, however, after Roosevelt's death, New York Judge Frederick S. Quintero ruled that Roosevelt's public utterances were a "valid and effective *gift* of all of his papers . . . to be placed, maintained, and preserved in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library."<sup>52</sup>

The ruling eventually gave the public access to all of the materials in the Roosevelt Library's archives consistent with respect for the feelings of living

persons and the requirements of national security. Roosevelt ended up creating, in spite of his contrary private desires, an institution that fulfilled the roles that he publicly advertised for it, providing unprecedented public access to sensitive government materials decades sooner than they otherwise would have been available. In no other major nation can citizens so easily obtain access to previously secret, sensitive, personal, as well as banal documents and collections as one can in a presidential library.<sup>53</sup> British citizens wishing to see the hand-written correspondence between King George VI and President Roosevelt, for instance, would find this difficult in England. But at the Roosevelt Library, within half an hour of entering the library's archive, a researcher assisted by professional archivists would be able to see copies of documents that Roosevelt thought should be sealed forever.

### A Commemorative Shift

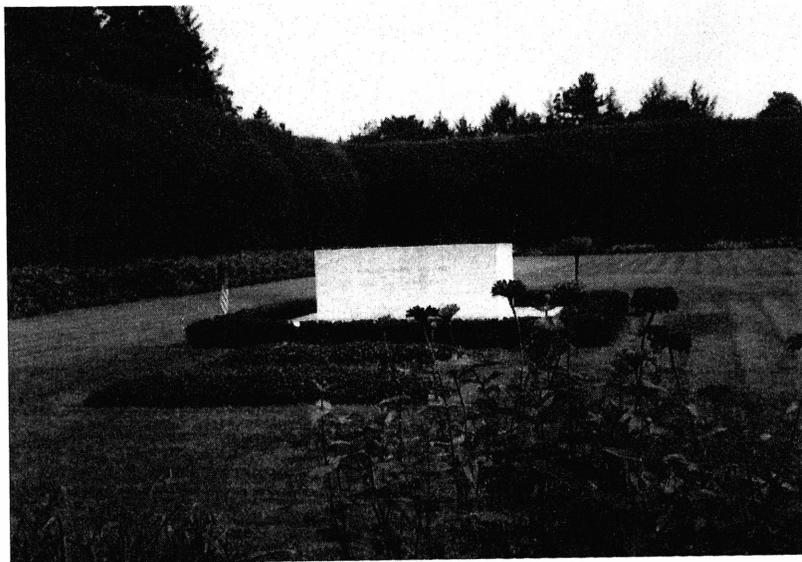
On April 12, 1945, as the Second World War was drawing to a close, President Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Warm Springs, Georgia. The President's body was taken by train to Washington, D.C., and then on to Hyde Park, and during the journey thousands of people lined the tracks to pay their last respects to the President. Roosevelt was laid to rest near the Roosevelt Library, where his grave completed the monument that he had created for himself. The library helped to insure the continuance of Roosevelt's memory after his death through his museum and archive, which would help to project his life and image into the future. At the Roosevelt Library, FDR thought of himself as a tourist object, and placed himself within a narrative circuit of the settings and objects that framed his life, from the Roosevelt family mansion in which he grew up (figure 4), to his personal collections, to his presidential work, and, finally, to the large stone that he had designed for his grave (figure 5). The narrative generated confers authenticity on the complex through the telling of a cyclical story, which concludes by returning Roosevelt to sacred American soil.

The narrative circuit that Roosevelt designed for himself is structured around the idea of mystified presidential labor. As Dean MacCannell has written, many tourist sites, such as the pyramids of Egypt or Saint Peter's in Rome, are opulent displays of stored labor power that present the production and storage of work as a form of collectable authenticity.<sup>54</sup> The Roosevelt Library is meant to store and display every preservable trace of Roosevelt's life and labor for as long as possible. The archived traces of Roosevelt's labor become the sacra of the presidency at the site, and are meant to possess an almost religious essence. The mystified quality of this labor is emphasized by Roosevelt's plan to restrict access to the archive, which was to be seen even more than it was to be used.

The commemorative transition that the presidential library represents may be described in part as a shift from a classical to a Christian mode of commemoration. In classical commemoration, an abstract or representational monument, such as the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial, visually attests to



**Figure 4:** The Roosevelt family home in Hyde Park, New York. *Courtesy of Bess Reed.*



**Figure 5:** The graves of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt near the Roosevelt Library. *Courtesy of Bess Reed.*

the heroism of a president. In presidential libraries, a comparatively Christian mode of commemoration, objects used by a president become relics, and are stored and displayed in a federal facility that affirms a heroism that is supposedly already accepted. In other words, the touch of a president potentially transforms any object into a relic to be kept by a presidential library. Royal Cortissoz, author of the inscription inside the Lincoln Memorial, foresaw this transformation of presidential belongings into relics and feared it. Cortissoz wrote to the architect of the Lincoln Memorial, Henry Bacon, and warned against “turning the [Lincoln Memorial] into a miscellaneous, museumy place for the army to deposit ‘relics’ in.”<sup>55</sup> Yet the process of creating an archival form of commemoration that displayed relics in museums was not to be repressed. National presidential commemoration embraced relics, validated itself through archives, and became a newly personalized, arguably mundane form of American commemoration in the presidential library.

Roosevelt was able to conceive of an archival memorial in part because of shifts in media technology and culture that occurred before and during the twentieth century.<sup>56</sup> These shifts increased the importance of archives for preserving new forms of memory, making it possible for Roosevelt to think of an archival commemoration. Donald M. Lowe and others have analyzed how shifts in media technology layer different modes of perception:

Culture can be conceived of as oral, chirographic, typographic, or electronic, in accordance with the communications media which sustain it. Each of these four types of culture organizes and frames knowledge qualitatively in an entirely different manner than the other three. And . . . each subsequent type is superimposed on the previous one.<sup>57</sup>

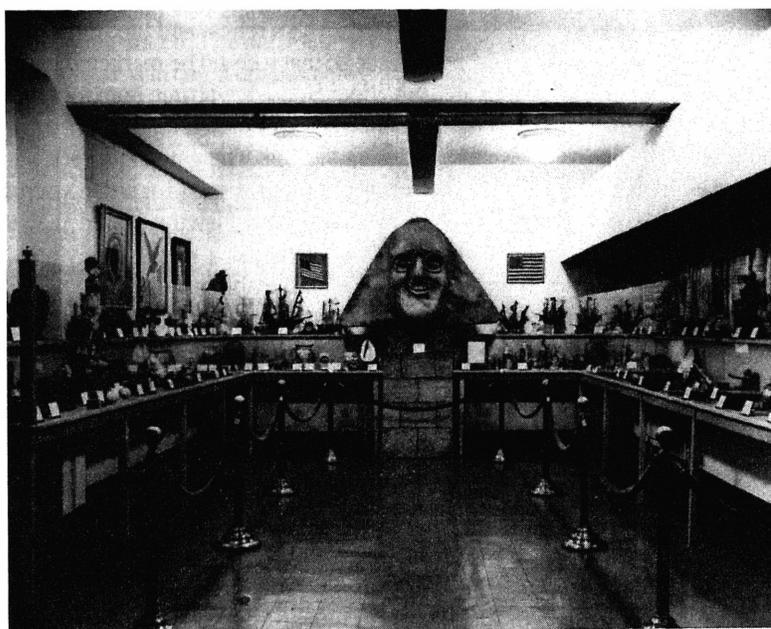
Roosevelt’s political career stretched from a typographic culture characterized by print media, to the beginnings of a culture that relied more on such media as “telegraph, telephone, phonograph, radio, film, television, audio-video tape and disc, computer, plus others yet to come.”<sup>58</sup>

The presidential library that Roosevelt designed was capable of storing and displaying both old and new forms of memory. In addition to its millions of government documents, it also preserves thousands of photographs, miles of film and audio tape, and every relic of Roosevelt’s experience that he thought significant, down to a horseshoe that he found in the Sahara desert during the Second World War.<sup>59</sup> Collections, forms of relics, can be a way to project an ego ideal—for instance, a collection of paintings, such as Andrew Mellon’s, can represent a collector’s aesthetic sensibility, intelligence, and wealth.<sup>60</sup> The Roosevelt Library took this process one step further by combining a museum with a personal and national archive. Through the organization of his presidential library into a tourist site and museum, Roosevelt was able to elevate the idiosyncrasy of his collections to the level of national relics.<sup>61</sup>

### The Roosevelt Library's Life Cycle

Changes in cultural technology made possible—and have continued to affect—the presidential library as an institution. Through FDR's live radio "fire-side chats," to his nearly weekly appearances in filmed newsreels, to the previously unprecedented reproduction of his images throughout American culture, Roosevelt was able to become an effective shaper of his image in the mass media.<sup>62</sup> Herbert Hoover, while he was President, received at most 600 letters a day, while FDR sometimes received as many as 6,000.<sup>63</sup> This proliferation of letters, many of which are stored at the Roosevelt Library, is evidence that FDR forged a more powerful connection with the public through the mass media than did most of his predecessors. Some Americans, inspired by Roosevelt's image, even created folk-art representations of the President that are stored at the library. One, a sphinx with Roosevelt's face and characteristic cigarette holder that was part of the Roosevelt Library's early displays, manifests a popular appreciation for the mystery of FDR's political success, a mystery connected to Roosevelt's mastery of new media technologies (figure 6).

The Roosevelt Library was first opened to the public in 1941, but wartime restrictions on travel held down admissions until the second half of the 1940s. From 1947 to 1986, however, admissions averaged nearly 200,000 annually, an impressive figure for an institution that is a substantial drive from any large city.



**Figure 6:** An early display room at the Roosevelt Library, featuring a portrait of FDR as sphinx. *Courtesy of the Roosevelt Library.*

By the late 1980s, a slow and steady decline had set in, and by 1994 admissions had dropped to 136,000.<sup>64</sup> The displays of Roosevelt's relics, from his christening gown to his extensive political memorabilia, began to lose some of their appeal as living memory of Franklin Roosevelt passed away. As Pierre Nora has written, sites of memory can become "like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded."<sup>65</sup> As the tide of living memory that Nora refers to withdrew in the early 1990s, the Roosevelt Library faced what its director Verne Newton called "a demographic crisis."<sup>66</sup> To reach a new generation of patrons who "processed information in a fundamentally different way," Newton believed that "the Roosevelt Library would have to reinvent itself or eventually die."

When Newton became director, the exhibits had only been revised twice since the library had opened, and were largely static displays of relics in glass cases accompanied by extensive wall text. Newton observed visitors in the Roosevelt Library's museum, and found that although the declining numbers of older tourists were engaged, younger visitors were restless and bored. He stated that "the way this new generation receives its information is through interactive video and audio displays, and this was our guiding philosophy as we redesigned the museum." Newton had the library create its own video game that confronts visitors with the same information FDR had as President, for instance about whether to send destroyers to Britain during the early days of the Second World War, and the visitor must choose between various options. Younger audiences are more interested in this game than in Roosevelt's relics, and the library even contemplated expanding the computer game so that it could be marketed nationwide. Another new display recreates the White House's wartime map room, and uses a visitor-activated recording of a voice actor to create an imagined fragment of one of Roosevelt's workdays during the war. The game and recreation were meant to make a president who seems almost as distant for some younger visitors as the founding fathers seem more relevant. Newton stated that the Roosevelt Library, in order to survive, "must become a mini-Disneyland. It needs to entertain, educate, and even create a marketable product."

The Roosevelt Library, like succeeding presidential libraries, has gone through a life-cycle in its displays, and also in the way its archive is used. A presidential library is born as the culmination of a huge fund-raising drive, its museum is opened to tourists, and then its archive is opened to scholars.<sup>67</sup> In a presidential library's early years, there is immense work behind the scenes as archivists painstakingly catalog and organize presidential materials, which are slowly declassified and released for use by scholars, who then write histories and monographs. Often, just as tourist interest begins to wane, best-selling biographies are published that make use of the unprecedented scope of materials and access a presidential library provides. They often revive interest in a presidential library's subject, even if they sometimes create unflattering portraits of presidential lives.<sup>68</sup> Since 1950, hundreds of books on Roosevelt, the depres-

sion, and the Second World War have been written by making use of the Roosevelt Library's archive. When eventually the interest of scholars, as with tourists, subsides, it becomes a continuing challenge for presidential libraries to justify their existence. The Roosevelt Library, like many presidential libraries, currently has a successful program to encourage the use of its archive by high school and grade school students.<sup>69</sup> President Roosevelt, who originally wanted to eliminate the room at the library for researchers, and thought many papers should be preserved but sealed forever, might be disquieted by the sight of students working with the raw materials of his history at the Roosevelt Library.

### The Presidential Library

The unusual hybrid commemorative institution that Franklin Roosevelt invented came to seem natural and necessary to his successors, and every president since has had a hand in the creation of his own presidential library. Presidential libraries have increased dramatically in size and cost, but have not changed essentially from the model laid out by FDR. The presidential library as an institution is one reflection of what Arthur Schlesinger called the "Imperial Presidency." Schlesinger identified Roosevelt as the first in a long line of presidents who took on, and sometimes abused, increased powers that resulted from the Second World War, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the Cold War. Not only did those who occupied the presidency since the 1930s have greater power than nearly all of their predecessors, but the role of former presidents was also dramatically enhanced. The presidential library has come to function as the base for what Senator William Roth has called "the Imperial ex-Presidency."<sup>70</sup> Presidential libraries, especially since Lyndon Johnson's was opened in 1971, have increasingly functioned as policy centers as well as archives. One example is the Carter Center, associated with the Carter Library, from which Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter have launched extensive philanthropic activities. The presidential library also functions as the most important institution for the expansion of the civil religion of the American presidency, continuing in a new form the structure of reverence initiated by the creation and use of such memorials as the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. With the presidential library, however, every president—not merely the exceptional—has a national monument. Presidential libraries reify the ideology that claims all presidents as exceptional human beings and leaders worthy of reverential commemoration.

The presidential library is based upon the idea of the archive as *the* effective storage system for contemporary memory. As Pierre Nora has written,

Modern memory is first of all archival. It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image . . . [for] society as a whole has acquired the religion of preservation and archivalization.<sup>71</sup>

Yet while presidential libraries are part of a societal urge for archives that has been called archive “fever” or “sickness,”<sup>72</sup> the displays in presidential libraries, while continuing to construct a veneration for presidential relics, increasingly revolve around recreations and simulations. Relics provide the authenticating foundation on which replicas and recreations have been built in the commemorative space of presidential libraries.<sup>73</sup> Although the Roosevelt Library did not originally have any replicated presidential spaces, its recent remodeling has given it three: its World War II map room, a recreation of a fragment of Roosevelt’s Oval Office, and a recreation of part of Eleanor Roosevelt’s post-White House office.<sup>74</sup> Recently some presidential libraries, such as Ronald Reagan’s in Simi Valley, California, have created a simulated “meet the President” display, using interactive CD-ROM technology.

Presidential libraries, with their museum collections, archival holdings, houses, and graves, mark a shift in commemoration reflective of changing technologies of memory. They are constructed to high standards and are designed to last for many hundreds of years. Inside, rather than unchanging permanence, however, are museum displays of presidential stories and American history that change over time. Each generation of presidential library directors, curators, and archivists—who might be thought of as priests and priestesses within contemporary archival temples—reconstructs the story of their president for every new generation of visitors. The technology of display changes as well, from glass cases filled with relics, to computer controlled exhibits that simulate a visitor’s meeting with a president. Especially as living memory of a president passes away, a library’s most important commemorative work is to transform presidential labor into history and myth and give it seemingly transcendent value.

### Notes

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1. This drawing is in the collections of the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York. FDR had for some time considered building his own archive. In 1934 he wrote to a Hyde Park neighbor that he wanted to build a “fireproof building in Hyde Park in which historical documents can be safely kept.” FDR to Dr. Edward J. Wynkoop, 15 October 1934, Library file, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

2. FDR to Henry J. Tombs, 22 November 1937, Library File, FDRL.

3. Michael F. Reilly, *Reilly of the White House* (New York, 1947), 170. Reilly was one of the Secret Service agents assigned to protect FDR, and he accompanied the President to Egypt during the Second World War.

4. For the earlier literature on the Roosevelt Library, which tends to be factual rather than interpretive, see esp. Donald R. McCoy, “The Beginnings of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library,” *Prologue* 7 (Fall 1975), 137-150; Frank L. Schick with Renee Schick and Mark Carroll, *Records of the Presidency: Presidential Papers and Libraries from Washington to Reagan* (Phoenix, Ariz., 1989), 159-167; Geoffrey Ward, “Future Historians Will Curse as Well as Praise Me,” *Smithsonian* 20 (December 1989), 58-69; and Curt Smith, *Windows on the White House: The Story of Presidential Libraries* (South Bend, Ind., 1997), 41-58.

## The Roosevelt Presidential Library 191

5. Data: Office of Presidential Libraries, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., 20408. Annual admissions to all presidential libraries generally totals about 1.5 million a year.
6. Some excellent examples of the literature on memory and commemoration are: Pierre Nora, Editor, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1996-1998); John R. Gillis, Editor, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, (Princeton, N.J., 1994); Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley, 1998); and Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J., 1997).
7. John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 14.
8. Presidential papers were privately owned until the Presidency of Richard Nixon. In 1974, during the Watergate crisis, Congress seized President Richard Nixon's presidential papers, and the Presidential Records Act of 1978 ended the private ownership of presidential papers. See Schick, *Records of the Presidency*, 17, 242.
9. Washington to James McHenry, 3 April 1797, *George Washington: Writings* (New York, 1996), 993.
10. Washington, "Last Will and Testament," *Writings*, 1029.
11. John D. Knowlton, "Properly Arranged and So Correctly Recorded," *American Archivist* 27 (July 1964), 372.
12. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995), 14.
13. "Dedication of the Hayes Memorial Library," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly*, 25 (Oct. 1916), 401.
14. Donald W. Wilson, "Presidential Libraries: Developing to Maturity," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21 (Fall 1991), 771.
15. On Andrew Mellon, see Arthur M. Schlessinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order* (Boston, 1957), esp. 62, and Burton Hersh, *The Mellon Family: A Fortune in History* (New York, 1978).
16. Emphasis in original. Geoffrey C. Ward, *A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt* (New York, 1989), 752.
17. Hersh, *The Mellon Family*, 349.
18. In spite of his impressive collection, Mellon was inarticulate on the subject of art, but he would stare at his canvases with such intensity that his aide John Walker believed that a profound connection existed between Mellon and his paintings. John Walker, *Self-Portrait with Donors* (Boston, 1974), 106.
19. Walker, *Self-Portrait with Donors*, 132.
20. Homer Cummings to FDR, 15 January 1937, National Gallery file, FDRL.
21. When I mentioned the probable influence of the National Gallery on FDR's creation of his Library to Richard A. Jacobs, then Director of the Office of Presidential Libraries in Washington, D.C., he said that he had believed for many years that Franklin Roosevelt got the idea to create the first presidential library largely from Andrew Mellon's gift to the nation of the National Gallery. Jacobs, personal communication, 18 August 1995.
22. Homer Cummings to FDR, 15 January 1937, National Gallery file, FDRL.
23. Statutes at Large 1062-1066.
24. On Jefferson's admiration for classical architecture, see Jack McLaughlin, *Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder* (New York, 1990).
25. William Lescaze, "America is Outgrowing Imitation Greek Architecture," *Magazine of Art* 30 (June 1937), 375.
26. *New York Times*, 8 April 1937, 2.
27. On FDR's relationship with Tombs, see Ward, *A First-Class Temperament*, esp. 736.
28. Toombs to FDR, 13 November 1937, Library File, FDRL.
29. In this letter FDR wrote, "Before you and I die we will have revived Hudson River Dutch." FDR to Toombs, 22 November 1937, Library File, FDRL.
30. For the square footage of the FDR Library, see Schick, *Records of the Presidency*, 254. Since its original construction the Roosevelt Library has been expanded to over 50,000 square feet. Other more recent presidential libraries, such as the Johnson and Reagan Libraries, are well over 100,000 square feet.
31. FDR to Morison, 28 February 1938, Waldo Gifford Leland Papers, FDRL.
32. Morison to FDR, 11 March 1938, Library Files, FDRL.
33. FDR to Keith Morgan, 25 May 1938, Library Files, FDRL.
34. Journal of Robert D. W. Connor, 4 July 1938, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library.
35. Schick, *Records of the Presidency*, 157.
36. FDR to Beard, 1 November 1938, Library File, FDRL. Other letters sent out that day were similar. Roosevelt got Professor Morrison to assist him in drawing up the list of invitees.

192 Benjamin Hufbauer

37. Press Release, 10 December 1938, Library File, FDRL.
38. Press Release, 10 December 1938, Library File, FDRL.
39. *New York Times*, 11 December 1938, 1.
40. Library File, FDRL. *Chicago Tribune*, 13 December 1938.
41. Minutes, First Meeting of the Executive Committee of the President's Records and Historical Collections, 17 December 1938, Library File, FDRL.
42. McCoy, "The Beginnings of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library," 142.
43. Minutes, 17 December 1938, Library File, FDRL, 2-3.
44. Minutes, 17 December 1938, Library File, FDRL, 3.
45. Ward, "Future Historians," 58-69.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Statutes at Large, 1062-1066.
48. *New York Times*, 20 November 1939.
49. Connor Journal, 7 April 1940, and Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York, 1948), 171-172.
50. Connor Journal, 30 June 1941.
51. FDR to Director of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, 16 July 1943, FDR Case File, R.G. 44, FDRL.
52. Judge Quintero's ruling was made in July 1947. See letter from National Archivist Solon J. Buck to Senator Owen Brewster, 25 July 1947, FDR Library Case File, R.G. 44, FDRL, italics added.
53. Foreign researchers often come to the Roosevelt Library and its successors for access to documents that they are unable to obtain in their home countries. For an example, see, Martin M. Teasley, "The Eisenhower Library at Thirty-something," *Government Information Quarterly*, 12:1 (1995), 85, and Schick, *Records of the Presidency*.
54. See esp. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1976, 1989), 2-14.
55. Cortissoz to Bacon, 28 August 1911, quoted in Christopher Alexander Thomas, "The Lincoln Memorial and its Architect, Henry Bacon (1866-1924)," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990), 482.
56. See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982). Ong writes, "The shift from orality to literacy and on to electronic processing engages social, economic, political, religious, and other structures." (3), and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).
57. Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago, 1982), 2. See also James W. Carrey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston, 1988).
58. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, 4.
59. This horseshoe is now in the archive of the Roosevelt Library.
60. For instance, see Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 10-12, 139; Russell W. Belk *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London and New York, 1975), Jean Baudrillard, *A System of Objects*, translated by James Benedict (London and New York, 1996), and John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).
61. Verne Newton, personal communication, 21 August 1995.
62. The number of films, sound recordings, and photographs of Roosevelt was substantially greater than that generated for any previous twentieth-century president. For instance there about 42,000 still pictures in the Hoover Library, (which was build after the Roosevelt Library and based on its example), but over 134,000 still pictures in the FDR Library. Data from the Hoover and Roosevelt Libraries.
63. Fred Shipman, "What do You Know About the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library," 3, Library File, FDRL.
64. Data: Office of Presidential Libraries, Washington, D.C. Since 1994, admissions to the Roosevelt Library have increased.
65. Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, 1:7.
66. This and all subsequent quotes of Verne Newton in the following two paragraphs are: Roosevelt Library Director Verne Newton, personal communication, 21 August 1995.
67. For a discussion of the life-cycle of presidential libraries, see Don W. Wilson, "Presidential Libraries Developing to Maturity," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 21 (Fall 1991).
68. An example is provided by Robert A. Caro's multi-volume biography *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (New York, 1982- ), which has used materials in the Johnson Library to create a fascinating and disturbing account of the life of the 36th president.
69. Acknowledging changing demographic factors and technology, the Library also teamed with nearby Marist College to create a searchable on-line finding aid system and a digitized database featuring typed and facsimile versions of 13,000 documents from the archive.
70. Senator William V. Roth, Jr. "Ex-Presidential Perks Are Way Out of Hand," *USA Today*, 28 March 1984.

## The Roosevelt Presidential Library 193

71. Nora, "Between Memory and History," 8.

72. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, 1996), 91.

73. Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman, created the most significant change in presidential libraries by recreating the Oval Office at the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, which opened in 1957. This replicated Oval Office is the most popular display at the museum, and additional replicas of the Oval Office now draw tourists at the Kennedy, Johnson, Ford, Carter, and Reagan Libraries, while another is planned for the Clinton Library.

74. Presidential monuments in Washington, D.C., prior to the advent of the presidential library represent the president alone. Since the invention of the presidential library, first ladies have been commemorated as keepers of the domestic environment of the White House and as policy advocates. This process of incorporating the first lady within the commemorative and archival framework of presidential libraries culminated in 1972, when a new Eleanor Roosevelt gallery was added to the FDR Library. The displays at the library include materials on her work as first lady as well as her work after FDR's death.