

Val-Kill Grounds Tour

ACTIVITY 3: The Grounds at Val-Kill



This packet includes general information for you to use on a self-guided tour of the grounds.

Information included:

- Site map
- Grounds highlights
- Swan Cottage (Playhouse/Dollhouse)
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- July 7, 1955 “My Day” article
- Notes on Dutch Architecture

ACTIVITY 3: The Grounds at Val-Kill



Information at a glance, developed by the Roosevelt-Vanderbilt NHS

Eleanor Roosevelt's Home

Val-Kill Cottage

Originally constructed from 1926-1929 to house Val-Kill Industries, the building was remodeled in 1936 to serve as a temporary residence for Eleanor Roosevelt and her secretary. It became Mrs. Roosevelt's permanent home in 1945 until her death in 1962. One child who visited her home described it as looking like "a whole lot of houses bunched together."

Stone Cottage

"My missus and some of her female political friends want to build a shack on a stream in the back woods," FDR wrote in 1924. This "shack" turned out to be a fieldstone Dutch colonial style structure built by FDR in 1925 for Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman. Mrs. Roosevelt used it as a retreat until 1937, it was used as a residence by her two friends until 1947. John Roosevelt and his family made the cottage their summer and weekend residence from 1951 until 1970. Presently, the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill, a non-profit organization that was instrumental in the establishment of Val-Kill as a national historic site, occupies the building as a program center and headquarters.

The Doll House- "Swan Cottage"

Sara Delano Roosevelt, FDR's mother had this one room colonial style house built on the grounds of her estate "Springwood", in 1935 as a play area for her great grandchildren, Eleanor and Curtis Dall (Sisty and Buzzy). It had electricity as well as hot and cold running water. The structure was moved to Val-Kill after FDR's death in 1945 for the use of later grandchildren.

The Playhouse

Originally built in 1928 as a 3-car garage and tool storage area. In 1936 the forge that was used to produce pewter and other metal objects at Val-Kill Industries was moved from the factory into this building. It was converted into the playhouse as a place for dance and other social activities in 1941. Elliott Roosevelt used a portion of it as an office in the late 40's and then it was remodeled into an apartment for Mrs. Roosevelt's chauffeur. After Mrs. Roosevelt's death, her son John made it into an apartment that was leased to tenants.

The Stable-Garage

Built in 1937, it housed the Roosevelt horses. Mrs. Roosevelt kept her favorite mount "Dot" there to ride whenever she was in Hyde Park.

The Bridge and Pond

Even before the stone cottage was constructed, a flat wooden bridge existed at Val-Kill in the same location as the present one. In 1934 a new bridge was erected which had planks and a low log railing. John Roosevelt added the high railing in later years. The structure became known as Mrs. Roosevelt's doorbell. The wooden planks made a clattering sound when cars passed

The Grounds at Val-Kill



Called Val-Kill Brook or Lake Eleanor by FDR, the pond covers 7 acres and has an average depth of 4 feet. It has provided a habitat for various aquatic creatures. Several species of fish can be spotted darting within its murky depths including, rock bass, pickerel and catfish. Snapping and painted turtles, as well as the northern water snake and black racer, are year round residents of the pond. Many species of waterfowl can be found nesting in the pond at different seasons of the year including mallards and wood ducks; great blue, little blue and green herons; and Canada geese. There is also quite a variety of vegetation growing in the pond area, the most prevalent being swamp iris, bull lilies, and purple loosestrife, which was Mrs. Roosevelt's favorite. Of the loosestrife, which peaks in the months of mid July and August, she wrote, "I remember it all through the year as one of the most brilliant of nature's shows."

The Grounds

The grounds were always the scene of constant year-round activity at Val-Kill and the main attraction of the site. The property, purchased in 1911 by FDR, was the favorite picnic spot of the family even before structures had been built there.

The outdoor fireplace, built in 1933, was the site of countless picnics. In later years, Mrs. Roosevelt held an annual picnic for the Wiltwyck School for delinquent boys. In 1950 a tennis court was constructed. If none of these activities proved enticing, horseback riding was available, or a stroll through the gardens and possibly a hike in the woods could be enjoyed by guests (depending on the good will of mosquitoes).

Shortly after the stone cottage was erected, the stream that ran through the grounds, was dammed up to form a pond where fishing and canoeing could be enjoyed in the summer, and ice-skating in the winter. A swimming hole was dug in 1925 to encourage FDR's visits. This pool was lined with concrete and included a diving board, but no filtration mechanism existed to clean the water.

The swimming pool was used by Roosevelt family members, friends and some of the more famous visitors to Val-Kill, including King George VI of England, Winston Churchill, and Princess Julianna of the Netherlands.

Ten years later, a more modern pool was constructed directly south of the stone cottage. It was heated and filtered. The water was circulated through the filtration system 4 times every 24 hours. The water temperature was approximately 75 to 80 degrees. The pool measured 51' x 20'. It was 3'8" deep on the south end and graduated to a depth of 9' on the other end. At one time there was a small stature of a boy on a flat pedestal on the shallow side. It dated back to 1941. (John Roosevelt's widow, in memory of her husband returned, this to the park, hence the plaque by the pool.)

The Flagpole

The flagpole was added to Val-Kill in 1940. It became a family tradition on the fourth of July to gather family and friends around the flagpole for a formal reading of the Declaration of Independence. Eleanor Roosevelt was a descendent of Philip Livingston, one of the signers of this document.

The Grounds at Val-Kill



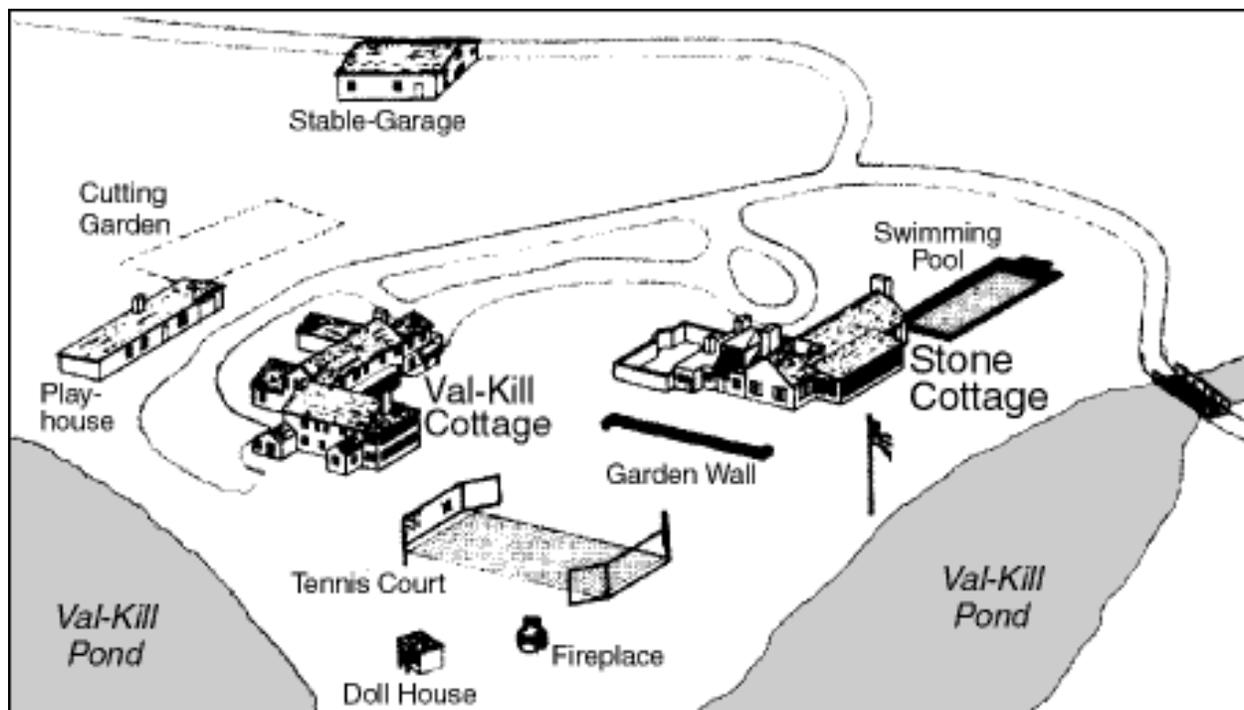
The Gardens

When Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman were in residence at Val-Kill, Miss Cook created and maintained a formal garden directly behind the enclosed courtyard to the stone cottage and the cutting garden behind the playhouse. She also supervised the general landscaping of the grounds. After the two women left in 1947, these gardens were no longer sustained in the same formal manner.

Mrs. Roosevelt continued the use of the cutting garden, changing it to suit herself. In 1960 an additional rose garden was established in an enclosed area which she could see from the windows of her home. "...to my joy I found my garden filled with roses and I picked enough to fill my little apartment in New York and even give a few away..."

Whenever she was at her Val-Kill cottage, her regular routine would always include a walk in her garden to cut flowers for her home. It was one of the great pleasures of her life. The enabling legislation for the establishment of the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site called for the creation of a memorial to Eleanor Roosevelt at the site. The restoration of her beloved gardens was chosen to be the memorial.

Val-Kill Site Map



Swan Cottage – Playhouse (Dollhouse)



Poughkeepsie Journal, September 1, 1935

Miniature Summer White House for Dall Children at Hyde Park

Hyde Park, Aug, 31 -- When Eleanor and Curtis Dall come to visit their great grandmother, Mrs. James Roosevelt, at her Hyde Park estate next week, they will have a place of their very own to cook, to "set table", to serve dinner, to "wash up", to read and to entertain, for Mrs. Roosevelt has had a very complete playhouse built for them.

Swan Cottage, as the playhouse is called, is on a graveled path some three hundred yards southeast of the main house. It is a small, gray frame building with whit trimmings, and suggests in appearance a center-hall colonial house. Its architect, Charles Short of New York, a friend of Mrs. Roosevelt, designed it to follow the lines of the Summer White House as nearly as possible. As Mrs. Roosevelt pointed out, the white-pillared porch adds to this effect.

Inside there is a single large room, approximately twelve by fifteen feet. It has four windows, one on either side of the door, the other two directly opposite. The walls are painted clear blue, the ceiling white. The cottage is lit with electricity. Mrs. Roosevelt is particularly pleased with the lighting fixture that is suspended from the ceiling, a white bowl trimmed with blue. It carries out her color scheme, and she has, she says, a "blue complex." The cottage has a hardwood floor, which she plans to cover with a congoleum rug.

Curtis and Eleanor can use half of the room as a kitchen, half as a drawing room, Mrs. Roosevelt said. Then, when the round table is set, they have a dining room too. Incidentally, she refers to them as Eleanor and Curtis, she wants "none of this Sistie and Buzzie business."

The kitchen half of the room is at the right of the door. Against the shorter north wall is a diminutive white sink with hot and cold water. Below the sink is a cabinet stocked with a set of small, clear red dishes, and another set in blue and white. Mrs. Roosevelt is very pleased to have found them in the "five and ten."

Next to the sink is a white-enameled kitchen table. A small electric stove, equipped with a set of pans for various uses, sits on the table. Here the children can cook without any danger from matches.

The drawing room end of the cottage has two bookcases, chairs and a table. The bookcases are still unpainted. The children will finish them while they are here on a two-week vacation, before they go back to school.

Although the Dall children will be the first to use the playhouse, it was not built for them alone. All the great grandchildren will use it when they are old enough.

Swan Cottage – Playhouse (Dollhouse)



Mrs. Roosevelt is sure Curtis will enjoy housekeeping in the new playhouse. He likes to wash up. Eleanor, at the moment, is more interested in dogs and horses than she is in dishes and towels. Mrs. Roosevelt also feels that her three-year-old namesake, Sara Delano Roosevelt, the daughter of the President's eldest son, James, will enjoy the cottage. She is already domestically inclined.

The children who use the playhouse will be expected to keep it in order, with the help of their nursemaid. The servants of the main house will not, Mrs. Roosevelt said. For Swan Cottage is not only a place to play, it is a place to learn. And Mrs. Roosevelt believes that many valuable lessons are better learned at home than at school.

Notes on Dutch Architecture



The buildings on the grounds of Val-Kill offer a wonderful opportunity for students to experience Dutch architecture. While walking around the outside of the buildings or while visiting the Val-Kill website, take a minute to bring attention to the clear examples of classic Dutch style. The following notes provide a few examples of traditional trademarks of this style of architecture.

PROPORTION

The buildings are symmetrical. The line of symmetry typically occurs through the center door. A window may be included above the door. The Stone Cottage shows this trait on the front side and the west side. When looking at the structures, you must be sure to look for the original building and to exclude any additions that may have been added on. The roof line of typical Dutch homes is steep and the roof is approximately 1/3 of the facade.

MATERIAL

The primary building material is stone. Fieldstone would have been used in traditional Dutch architecture due to its abundance. FDR, who was actively involved in the construction of Val-Kill, was a local history buff and would have insisted on the natural material being used. The original roofing material would have been Creodipt cedar shingles and the exterior woodwork would have had three coats of white lead and linseed oil paint.

WINDOWS

The windows are double-hung and have 6 panes over 6 panes. Above the windows are structural keystones.



FOR RELEASE ON RECEIPT

JULY 7, 1955

My Day
(TR.MK.REG.U.S. PAT OFF.)
By Eleanor Roosevelt

Hyde Park, N.Y.—We celebrated the Fourth here in very quiet fashion, staying at home most of the day but having a goodly number of people to play tennis during the morning and for lunch.

I asked my son John to read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to all of the young people, for we had 10 youngsters between the ages of two and 16 over the past week-end. The youngsters, however, were much more interested in sparklers after dark and spending all possible time in the pool. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights remind them of school!

It was a good thing that the long weekend came during such a hot spell, for many people were able to get to the country and find some relief. Our swimming pool has been in almost constant use. I don't think anything gives the children more comfort than being able to plunge into the pool and stay there for an hour at a time. They have a wonderful game they call "Red Rover," and that seems to take all their interest and energy for long periods of time.

Eleanor Roosevelt Quotes



Eleanor Roosevelt was an accomplished author. She had a way of stating her thoughts and opinions in a way that was accessible to each and every citizen. The quotes below are examples of ER's wisdom gained from following her own advice; living life!

Share these quotes with your students. They can be used to spark conversations and reflections, introduce ER's character traits or to connect the present to the past.

QUOTES

Friendship with oneself is all-important, because without it one cannot be friends with anyone else in the world.

I could not at any age be content to take my place in a corner by the fireside and simply look on.

It is not fair to ask of others what you are unwilling to do yourself.

Life was meant to be lived, and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life.

One thing life has taught me: if you are interested, you never have to look for new interests. They come to you. When you are genuinely interested in one thing, it will always lead to something else.

As for accomplishments, I just did what I had to do as things came along.

For it isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it.

Eleanor Roosevelt Quotes



I think, at a child's birth, if a mother could ask a fairy godmother to endow it with the most useful gift, that gift should be curiosity.

I used to tell my husband that, if he could make me 'understand' something, it would be clear to all the other people in the country.

It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

It is not more vacation we need - it is more vocation.

So I took an interest in politics, but I don't know whether I enjoyed it! It was a wife's duty to be interested in whatever interested her husband, whether it was politics, books, or a particular dish for dinner.

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

The giving of love is an education in itself.

The only advantage of not being too good a housekeeper is that your guests are so pleased to feel how very much better they are.

The things you refuse to meet today always come back at you later on, usually under circumstances which make the decisions twice as difficult as it originally was.