

Theodore Roosevelt, painted in 1903 by John Singer Sargent. Courtesy White House Historical Association.

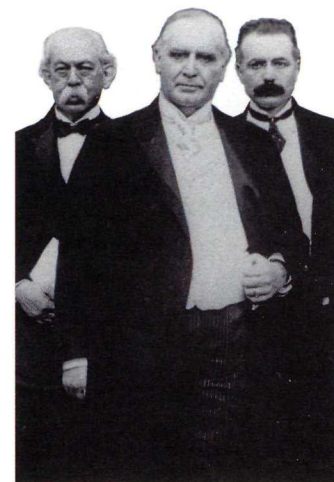
“It is a dreadful thing to come into the Presidency in this way; but it would be far worse to be morbid about it. Here is the task, and I have got to do it to the best of

Theodore Roosevelt

my ability; and that is all there is to it.”



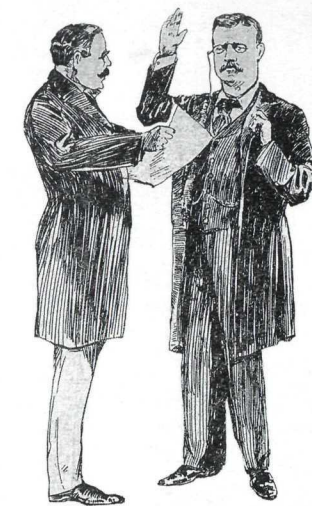
The library of the Wilcox house where Theodore Roosevelt became the 26th President of the United States reflects the opulence that characterized most of the residences on then-fashionable Delaware Avenue around 1900. It was an all-purpose room used predominantly by Mrs. Wilcox. Roosevelt took the oath of office standing in front of the bay window on the south side of the room wearing a frock coat lent him by Ansley Wilcox. The coat is now on display in the house.



President William McKinley was shot twice by 28-year-old anarchist Leon Czolgosz on September 6, 1901, during a public reception at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. Doctors removed one of the bullets but failed to find the second, contributing to the development of the infection that killed him eight days later. One of the last photographs of McKinley (*left*) shows him at the reception shortly before the assassin struck.

Ansley Wilcox describes the inauguration: “The Secretary of War, Mr. Root, was head of the cabinet.... He addressed the new President, calling him Mr. Vice-President, and on behalf of the Cabinet, requested him to take the oath of office. President Roosevelt answered simply, but with great solemnity, ‘Mr. Secretary, I will take the oath. And...I wish to state that it shall be my aim to continue...the policy of President McKinley, for the peace and prosperity of our beloved country....’

“Judge Hazel advanced and administered the oath to support the Constitution and laws. It was taken with an uplifted hand.... The whole ceremony was over within half an hour after the cabinet had entered the house, and the small company dispersed, leaving only the six cabinet officers with the President, who at once held an informal session in the library.”



The Roosevelt Presidency

From 1884 to the 1930s, this house was the home of Ansley Wilcox and his wife Mary Grace. When Wilcox, a distinguished Buffalo lawyer, married Mary Grace Rumsey on November 20, 1883, the bride’s father gave them the use of the house as a wedding present. The couple took up residence there the next year. Because of Wilcox’s prominence as a pioneer in the development of social work and civil service reform, important local and national figures were welcomed to the house.

One event that occurred here was of national significance and transcends all others in importance. On September 14, 1901, in the library of the Wilcox home, Theodore Roosevelt became the 26th President of the United States just hours after the death of President William McKinley. McKinley had been shot and critically wounded by an assassin in Buffalo on September 6th while attending a public reception at the Pan American Exposition. Vice President Roosevelt, who was on a speaking trip in Vermont when he learned of the tragedy, hurried to the city, where members of the Cabinet had begun to assemble to carry on the affairs of government. After surgery, McKinley rallied and the doctors assured Roosevelt that the President’s chances for recovery were excellent. By September 10th McKinley’s condition was so much improved that Roosevelt decided to join his wife and children for a planned outing in the Adirondack Mountains as an assurance to the nation that the danger was passed. Before leaving he gave a copy of his itinerary to his friend Ansley Wilcox, at whose house he had been staying.

Roosevelt arrived in the Adirondacks on September 11th. Late in the afternoon two days later, he was returning from a climb up nearby Mount Marcy when he noticed a man approaching rapidly on the trail. “There wasn’t a thought in my mind but that the President would live,” Roosevelt later recalled, “and I was perfectly happy until I saw the runner coming. I had had a bully tramp and was looking forward to dinner with the interest only an appetite worked up in the woods gives you. When I saw the runner I instinctively knew he had bad news, the worst news in the world.”

The man handed Roosevelt a telegram: “The President appears to be dying, and members of the Cabinet in Buffalo think you should lose no time in coming.” McKinley’s condition had worsened shortly after the doctors confidently told everyone that “no serious symptoms have developed.” When the surgeons sewed up the President’s wounds they did not allow for proper drainage, and a gangrenous infection soon set in. His body, weakened from shock and the loss of blood, could not fight it.

After some difficulty, Roosevelt found a wagon and driver to take him to North Creek, about 35 miles away, where a special train was waiting to carry him to Buffalo. They set out at a fast pace at about 10:30 p.m. “The roads were the ordinary wilderness roads and the night was dark,” Roosevelt wrote in his *Autobiography*. “But we changed horses two or three times . . . and reached the station just at dawn.” As he prepared to board the train, he was told that President McKinley was dead.

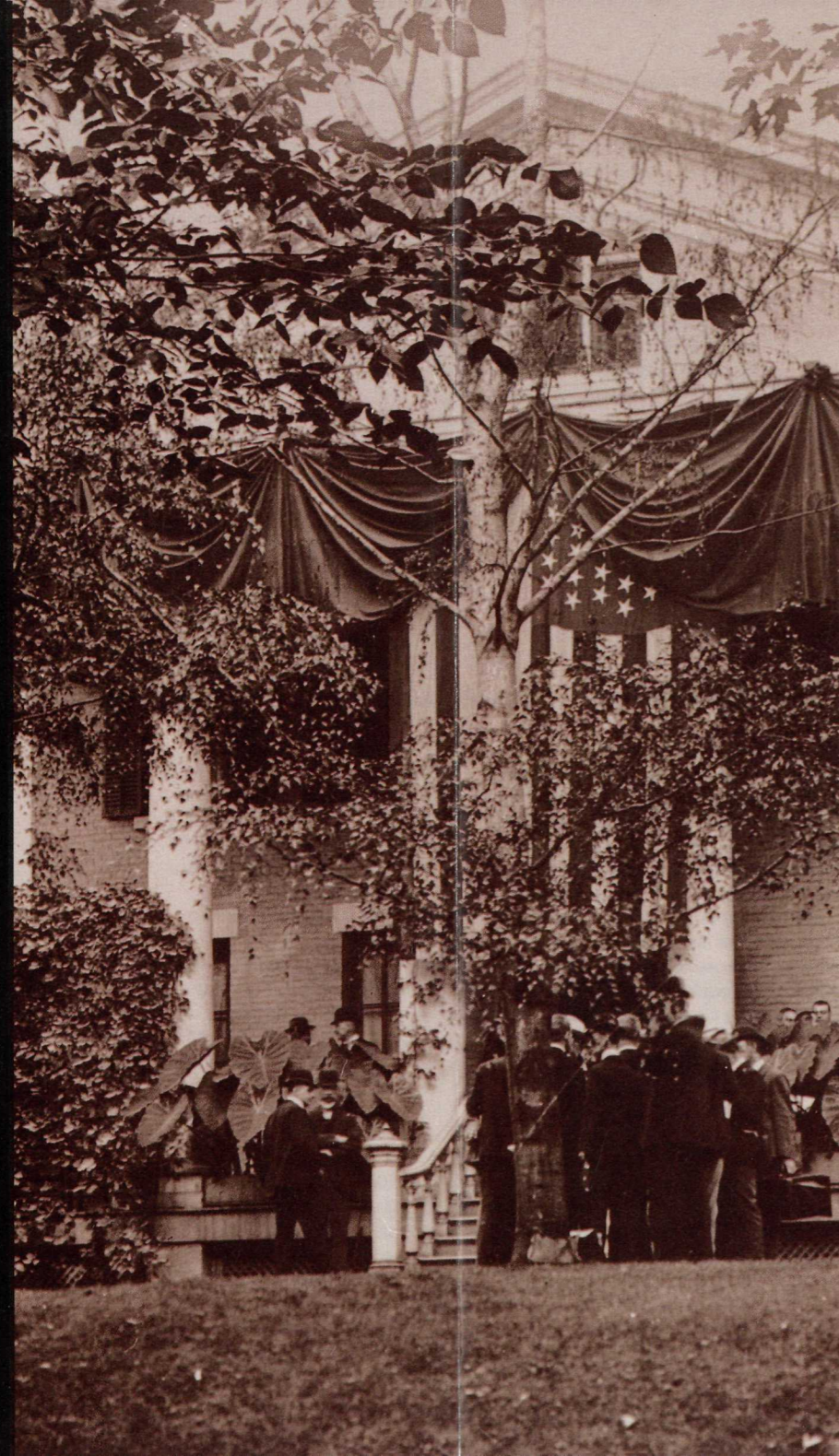
Roosevelt arrived in Buffalo about 1:30 p.m. on September 14th and drove immediately to the Wilcox house. Before taking the oath of office, however, he paid his respects to Mrs. McKinley at the J. G. Milburn house, seven blocks north on Delaware Avenue, where she and President McKinley had been staying. When Roosevelt returned to the Wilcox house, all the members of McKinley’s Cabinet except Secretary of State John Hay and Secretary of the Treasury Lyman Gage, who were not in Buffalo, assembled in the library. The chairs and other furnishings were still slipcovered because the Wilcox family had been away for the summer and, except for Roosevelt’s brief stay after McKinley was shot, the house had been closed. Secretary of War Elihu Root suggested that the oath be taken at once; Roosevelt agreed.

In his dash from the Adirondacks, the Vice President had not had time to gather up any of his formal attire. From among those invited to witness the ceremony, he managed to acquire a long frock coat, gray trousers, a waistcoat, black four-in-hand tie, and a pair of black patent leather shoes. Thus attired, at about 3:30 p.m. on Saturday, September 14, 1901, standing before Judge John R. Hazel of the U.S. District Court, Theodore Roosevelt took the oath of office and became the 26th President of the United States.

Roosevelt assumed the presidency at a time of great social ferment and change. During his administrations—he was elected President in his own right in 1904—more reform bills were passed than in any other administration since the Civil War. Energetic, positive, and extremely self-confident, possessing a firm understanding of power politics and the role America could play in the world, Roosevelt initiated epochal readjustments in the relationships of government and industry, established a strong policy of conservation, influenced the construction of the Panama Canal, which helped make the United States a world power, and engineered the peace treaty ending the Russo-Japanese War. (For

this last action he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906.) He saw himself as the “steward of the people,” his actions limited only by law and constitutional restrictions. To the people he was the “trust buster” and the man with the “big stick.” “I did not usurp power,” he said, “but I did greatly broaden the use of executive power.” Bringing new excitement and strength to the office, Theodore Roosevelt was the first of the modern Presidents.

The Ansley Wilcox House



“The people of Buffalo will always have a special interest in the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt because it was in this city that the awful tragedy occurred which made him president, and it was here that he was sworn in.... It takes less in the way of ceremony to make a president in this country, than it does to make a king in England or any monarchy, but the significance of the event is no less great.”

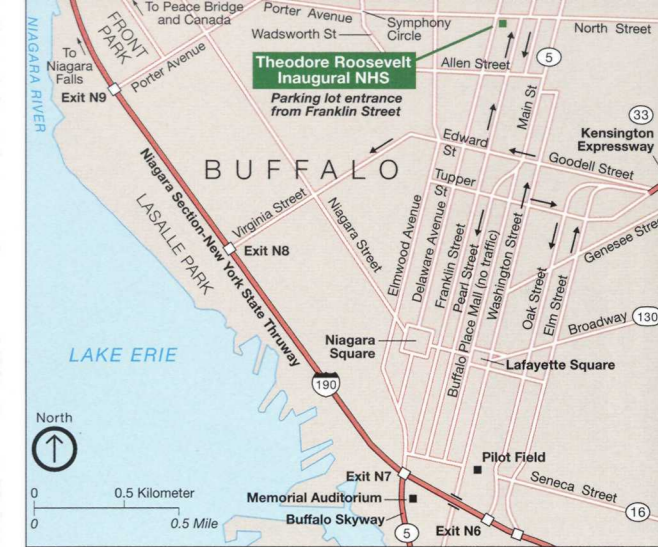
Ansley Wilcox, 1902



Ansley Wilcox, a prominent lawyer, was one of Buffalo's most distinguished citizens. He was also an active civic leader and a pioneer in state and national civil service reform. Wilcox was 45 years old in 1901. *Far left:* Reporters and photographers gather outside the Wilcox house on September 14, 1901, when Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as the 26th President of the United States.



The Ansley Wilcox house (left) is one of the oldest houses in Buffalo and one of five presidential inaugural sites located outside Washington, D.C. The others are Federal Hall, New York City, where George Washington became the nation's first President; Congress Hall, Philadelphia, Pa., scene of Washington's second inauguration and the inauguration of John Adams; the Coolidge house in Plymouth, Vt., where Calvin Coolidge was sworn in after the death of Warren G. Harding; and Love Field, Dallas, Tex., where Lyndon Johnson took the presidential oath on board Air Force One after the assassination of John F. Kennedy.



The House and Its History

The land on which the Ansley Wilcox house stands was once part of the grants of the Holland Land Company, a Dutch investment firm having large land holdings in most of western New York State and in northwestern Pennsylvania. Wilhelm Willink, a Holland Company agent, is the first name to appear on the abstract title. On March 1, 1809, Willink conveyed title to Ebenezer Walden. In 1838 when the "Patriot War" or Upper Canada Rebellion (1836-38) had strained relations between Canada and the United States, three companies of U.S. Artillery were ordered to Buffalo to establish a garrison. Walden's land was leased for the purpose, and a post, Buffalo Barracks, was erected on it. A row of officers quarters facing the parade ground was a prominent part of the post. The front portion of the Wilcox house was part of this row, and, until the abandonment of the barracks, this two-family structure housed the commanding officer and the post surgeon.

Many officers who served at the Buffalo Barracks later attained distinction. Among the officers who lived in the Wilcox house were Silas Casey, whose *System of Infantry Tactics* was adopted by the U.S. Army in 1862, and post surgeon Dr. Robert Wood, son-in-law of Zachary Taylor and father of the distinguished Confederate naval officer, John Taylor Wood. Dr. Wood later became assistant surgeon general of the United States. Other officers who served at Buffalo Barracks, and who must have frequented the house, included John C. Pemberton, Arnold Elzey, Samuel P. Heintzelman, Henry J. Hunt,

John Sedgwick, and Jefferson Davis, all of whom would attain distinction during the Civil War. Millard Fillmore, prominent Buffalo resident and a future President of the United States, was also a frequent participant in the social life of the post.

When Buffalo Barracks was abandoned in the late 1840s, the house passed into private ownership. A prominent Buffalo judge, Joseph G. Masten, was its first private owner, followed by a distinguished Buffalo lawyer, Albert P. Laning, and then by Frederick A. Bell. In 1883 Dexter P. Rumsey purchased the house and gave it to the Ansley Wilcoxes for their lifetime use.

Previous owners had by this time built a frame addition at the rear of the building and a brick coach house. By 1901 Wilcox had further improved the property. A Buffalo architect, George Cary, rebuilt the addition and remodeled the interior. The remodeling did not affect the interior of the original part, except for the two first-floor parlors, which were made into a large library. The house was transformed into a stately mansion, flavored with both Greek Revival and Adamesque styles and seasoned with the eclecticism of the 19th century.

The Wilcoxes lived in the house until their deaths in the early 1930s. After an attempt to raise funds to support the house as a memorial failed, it was sold for use as a restaurant. In the 1960s, when the house was in danger of being demolished, local citizens campaigned

to save the landmark and won, thanks largely to Liberty Bank, which bought the house and held it until it was declared a national historic site. Beginning in the autumn of 1970, the house was restored through the cooperation of the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site Foundation, Inc., the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, the Junior League, Erie County, the State of New York, and the National Park Service. The site was dedicated and opened to the public on September 14, 1971, the 70th anniversary of the inauguration. The dining room was opened in 1973. In 1981, the Victorian Lady's bedroom was opened. A special exhibit room highlights the events that occurred between September 5, 1901, when President McKinley arrived in Buffalo to attend the Pan-American Exposition, and September 14, 1901, when Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as the 26th President of the United States.

About Your Visit

The entrance to the house is on Delaware Ave., near North St. A parking area to the rear of the house can be reached from Franklin St., a one-way street leading north from downtown Buffalo. The house is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. The house is closed on the following holidays: January 1, Easter Sunday, Memorial Day, July 4, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and December 24, 25, and 31. The small admission charge is waived for organized school groups.

For Your Safety

Do not allow your visit to be spoiled by an accident. While every effort has been made to provide for your safety, there are still hazards

that require your attention and vigilance. Exercise common sense and caution.

Information

Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site is operated by the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site Foundation on behalf of the National Park Service. For more information, write the Superintendent, 641 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14202-1079; phone 716-884-0095; or FAX: 716-884-0330; or check our website at www.nps.gov/thri on the Internet.

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