Vanderbilt Mansion

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • NEW YORK

Frederick William Vanderbilt

Vanderbilt Mansion is a symbol of an era. Once the country home of Frederick W. Vanderbilt, gentleman, financier, and a grandson of "Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt who had amassed the family fortune, it is a magnificent example of the great estates built by wealthy financial and industrial leaders between 1880 and 1900.

The stately mansion of Indiana limestone is the focal point of the Vanderbilt estate. Designed by McKim, Mead and White, this 3-story American "royal palace," built at a cost of $660,000 (excluding furnishings), is one of the finest examples of Italian Renaissance architecture in the United States and a fitting symbol of the Gilded Age.

When Frederick Vanderbilt purchased the estate from Walter Langdon, Jr., in 1895, he was influenced by its proximity to New York City and its scenic charm. Also, his neighbors would be the Rodgerses, the Roosevelts, the Millses, and, farther upriver, the Astors—all families of prominence and wealth. But more importantly, Vanderbilt found the land ideal for pursuing his interests in purebred livestock and horticulture. The grounds of the estate were enlarged in 1905 when Vanderbilt purchased the Sexton estate adjoining his property on the north.

In 1895 the Vanderbilts had the Pavilion constructed and lived there while the mansion was built. The Langdon House, a smaller structure of Greek style, was torn down in 1896 and that October Vanderbilt began construction of his 54-room mansion. It was finished in December 1898.

During the next few months furnishings were installed and in May 1899 the first of many gala parties was given. The Vanderbilts looked forward to returning each spring and fall to their Hudson River estate. Their summers were spent elsewhere, but in winter they came here on weekends and at Christmas, living in the Pavilion, for the mansion was closed. During these visits they took particular delight in sleighing.

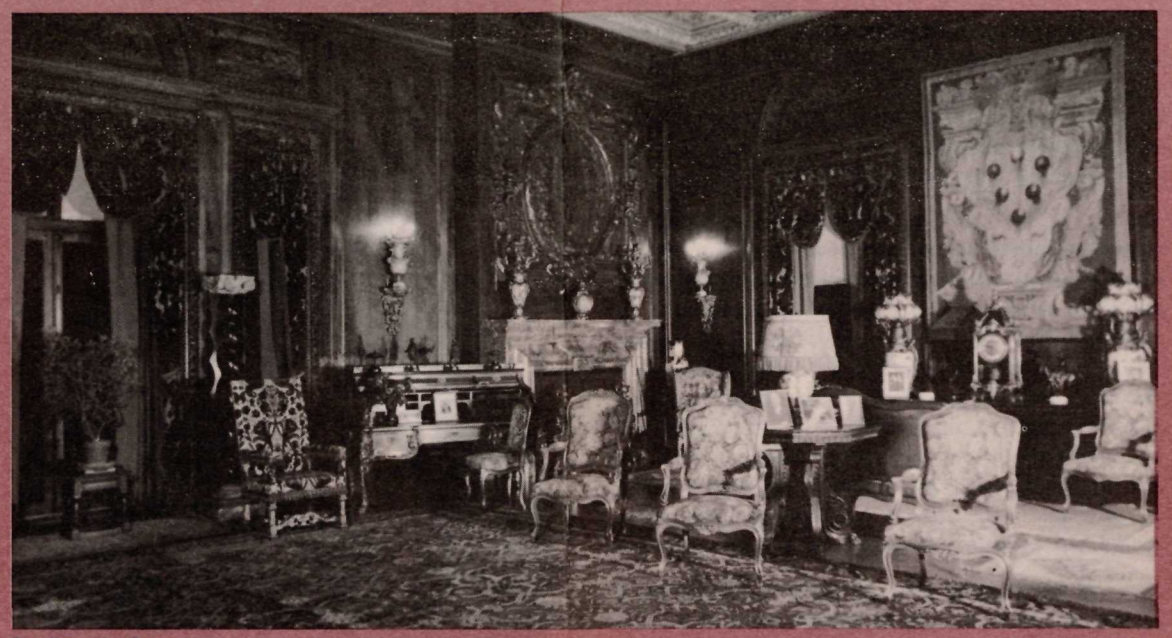
The mansion was lavishly furnished in continental motifs, mostly Italian and French. Noted decorators Georges A. Glaenzer and Ogden Codman designed the decor of some of the rooms, while McKim, Mead and White did the others. Cost was no hindrance to the Vanderbilts.

Like other wealthy families along the Hudson, the Vanderbilts entertained lavishly. Gala balls were held in the 30- by 50-foot drawing room, and refreshments were served in the spacious oval reception hall with its large fireplace imported from a European palace. Guests included nobility and leaders in business, politics, and the arts, such as the Duke of Marlborough, who was Vanderbilt's niece's husband, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Vanderbilts played an important role in the economy of the community, hiring local residents, when possible, to work in the mansion, on the grounds, the farm, coachhouse, and Italian gardens. When the Vanderbilts were at Hyde Park, 17 household helpers were needed at the mansion alone. They also took an active interest in the welfare of nearby villages. Louise Vanderbilt, an outgoing and friendly person, took particular delight in sponsoring strawberry and ice cream festivals for the children and in distributing clothing and toys to the needy at Christmas. She was also instrumental in bringing a Red Cross chapter to Hyde Park and in establishing the area's District Health Nurse Service.

Much of these community activities and entertaining at the mansion ceased after Louise Vanderbilt's death in 1926. Frederick Vanderbilt, though a power in the business world, was a quiet and reserved man who cared little for social life, preferring walks on the mansion grounds, yachting, and overseeing the care of his gardens and purebred livestock. He did, however, participate in the annual flower shows of the Dutchess County Horticultural Society and entered plants and flowers, garden produce, and livestock at the Dutchess County Fair.

When Frederick Vanderbilt died in 1938, the mansion and grounds were left to Louise Vanderbilt's niece, Margaret Van Alen (the late Mrs. Louis Bruguiere), since the Vanderbilts had no children. Following the niece's gift of the estate to the United States, Vanderbilt Mansion was designated a national historic site on December 18, 1940. The site consists of 212 acres on the east bank of the Hudson River.



The Drawing Room

GUIDE TO THE MANSION

With this guide, you will be able to tour the mansion at your own pace. Each room is labeled, and the uniformed staff will gladly answer any questions you may have.

First Floor

Reception Hall
Here the guests were greeted. Most of the marble is Italian, as are the mantel (which came from a palace) and the throne-type chairs around the walls. The clock on the table is French. The two cabinets at either side of the doorway are French Renaissance. Above the fireplace is a tapestry which bears the coat of arms of the Medici, the once-powerful Florentine family.

Study
From this room Frederick Vanderbilt conducted the estate affairs, including the operation of the greenhouses and gardens, and his 350-acre dairy and stock farm across the highway. Paneled in Santo Domingo mahogany, it reflects his quiet nature. Above the fireplace, early Italian pistols are grouped about an old Flemish clock.

The Library
This room, which was used as the family living room, is decorated with wood carvings done by Swiss artists brought to this country for that purpose. The Vanderbilts often had tea or spent a quiet evening here. Mrs. Vanderbilt wrote letters on the table at the right. Mr. Vanderbilt's favorite chair stands beside the far window.

South Foyer
On one of the old Italian dower chests is a model of Frederick Vanderbilt's yacht, the "Warrior". On the other chest is a small bronze group depicting a Russian winter scene. Above the chests are 16th-century Brussels tapestries showing incidents of the Trojan War.

The Drawing Room
This room was used for formal entertaining and occasional dances, for which small orchestras provided the music. The wall paneling is of Circassian walnut from Russia, and the twin fireplaces are made of Italian marble. From the French doors a path invited the guests to stroll across the lawn to the formal gardens.

Gold Room
In this room, designed after an 18th-century French drawing room, guests gathered for sherry before dinner. As is apparent, gold-leaf was not spared in decorating the room. The ceiling painting, done by American artist Edward E. Simmons in 1897, was discovered in 1962 during cleaning operations.

North Foyer
The Venetian lantern here matches the one in the south foyer. The large Florentine storage chest on the left is made of hand-carved wood decorated with gold leaf and lacquer. Above it is a 17th-century Brussels tapestry; opposite is an 18th-century Aubusson tapestry.

The Dining Room
This was the scene of many elaborate parties. The old Italian ceiling, the court chairs along the walls, and the two Renaissance mantels emphasize its spaciousness. The large table could be extended to seat 30 people. When they ate alone, the Vanderbilts used the round table, with Mr. Vanderbilt sitting at the south end and his wife opposite him.

Second Floor

North Foyer
On the Louis XVI table stands an Indian incense burner fashioned of marble and cloisonne. The chandelier is of beaded crystal. Original paintings by Schreyer, Bouguereau, and Villegas adorn the walls.

The Blue Room
Margaret Van Alen occupied this, the largest of the guestrooms, after she inherited the Vanderbilt property from her uncle. From the windows she had a splendid view of the Hudson River and the mountains beyond.

The Mauve Room
Also a guestroom, there is a finely woven Persian dowry rug in the center. The mantelpieces are of the French Empire period.

South Foyer
Paintings by Kellar-Reutlingen and Firman-Girard hang in the foyer, which leads to the master bedrooms. The French doors separate this wing from the rest of the floor.

Louise Vanderbilt's Room
This is a reproduction of a French queen's bedroom of the Louis XV period. The wall at the head of the bed is covered with hand-embroidered silk. The other walls are wood paneled, inset with French paintings. The rug, very heavily napped, was made especially for this room and weighs 2,300 pounds.

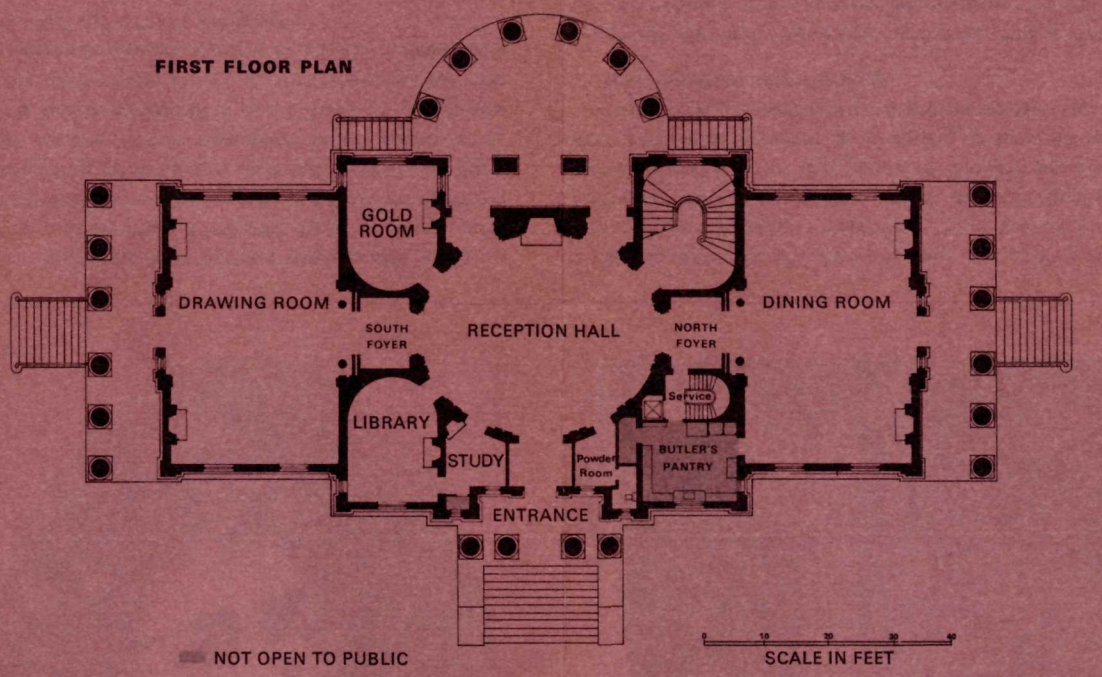
Frederick Vanderbilt's Room
The woodwork is carved Circassian walnut; the bed and dresser were designed as part of the woodwork. The walls are covered with 17th-century Flemish tapestry, and the designs of the silk lampshades are hand painted to match the figure on the Chinese bases.

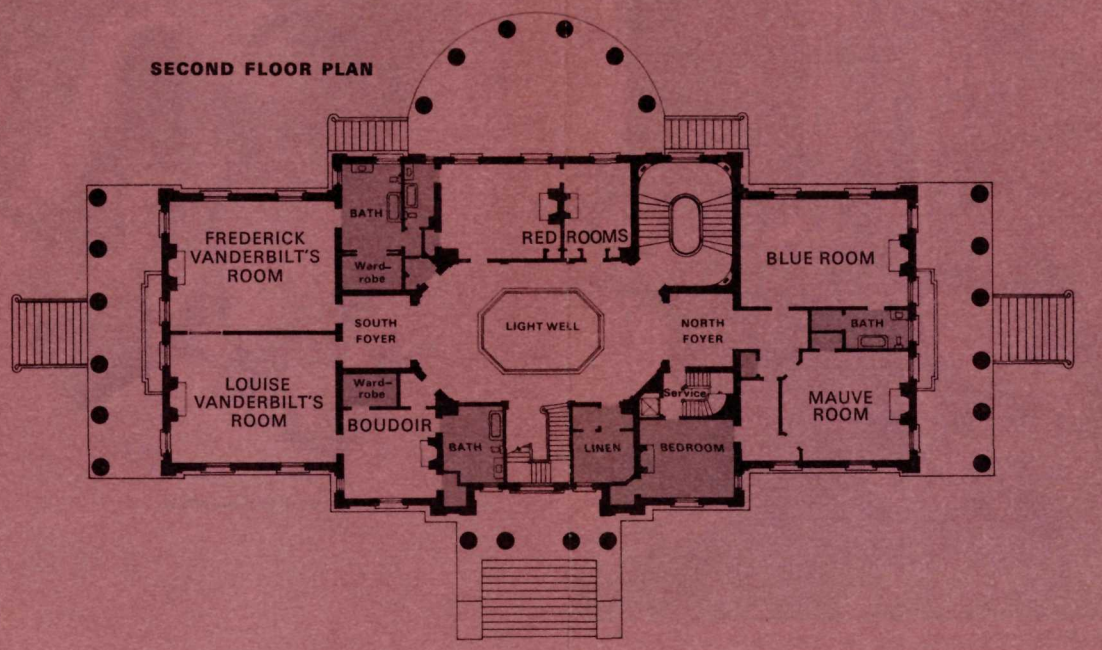
The Red Rooms
A doorway connects the two rooms to form a suite. The frieze on the mantel in the larger room is Greek.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Vanderbilt Mansion is on U.S. 9 about 6 miles north of Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Entrance to the grounds is by the main gate on U.S. 9 north of the village of Hyde Park. You are welcome to spend as much time on the grounds as you wish. Many of the trees are marked. From the west side of the mansion there are unsurpassed views of the Hudson and the surrounding countryside.

The mansion is open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is closed January 1 and December 25. The visitor center, in the Pavilion, contains exhibits and an audio-visual program.





The Gold Room

Louise Vanderbilt

FOR YOUR SAFETY

Your safety and your children's safety are of primary concern to us. *Please be careful going up and down stairs.*

Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Hyde Park, NY 12538, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

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