

Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
NEW YORK

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National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR



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*"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 my ability;
and that is
all there is about it."*

—Theodore Roosevelt

From 1884 to the 1930's this house on Buffalo's once-fashionable Delaware Avenue was the home of Ansley Wilcox and his wife Mary. When Wilcox, a distinguished Buffalo lawyer, married Mary Grace Rumsey on November 20, 1883, the bride's father gave them 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 6 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 10, McKinley's condition was so much improved that the Vice President decided to leave Buffalo, as an assurance to the Nation that the danger was passed. He would join his wife and children for a planned outing in the Adirondack

Mountains. Before leaving, Roosevelt gave a copy of his itinerary to his friend Ansley Wilcox, at whose house he had been staying.

Roosevelt arrived at the family's cottage near Mount Tahawus in the Adirondacks on September 12. He was, according to Mrs. Roosevelt, "naturally much relieved at the rapid recovery of the President. It has really been a most trying position for him." That afternoon, Roosevelt and his family hiked and canoed to the upper end of Colden Lake, where they camped for the night. The next day, while his wife and children returned to their cottage, the Vice President climbed to the summit of nearby Mount Marcy. On his way down, about 5 p.m., 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

President Roosevelt and Ohio Senator Mark Hanna confer on their way to the John G. Milburn house where President McKinley died and his body was being readied for the long, sad journey back to Washington.



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.)

Roosevelt hurried back to his family, where other telegrams repeated the tragic news and underscored the urgency of the matter. After some difficulty, Roosevelt found a wagon and driver to take him to the railway station at North Creek, about 50 miles away, where a special train was waiting to take him to Buffalo. They set out at a fast pace at about 11 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 stepped down from the wagon to board the train, he was told that President McKinley was dead.

Arriving in Buffalo about 1:30 p.m. on September 14, Roosevelt drove immediately to the Wilcox house. He decided to pay his respects to Mrs. McKinley before taking the oath of office. An escort was assembled, but he peremptorily refused it. He did not want to dramatize the passing of the Presidential power and glory from her dead husband to himself, so he drove off in a small, inconspicuous carriage to the J. G. Milburn house, where the McKinleys had been staying.

Roosevelt soon returned to the Wilcox house, where all of 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.

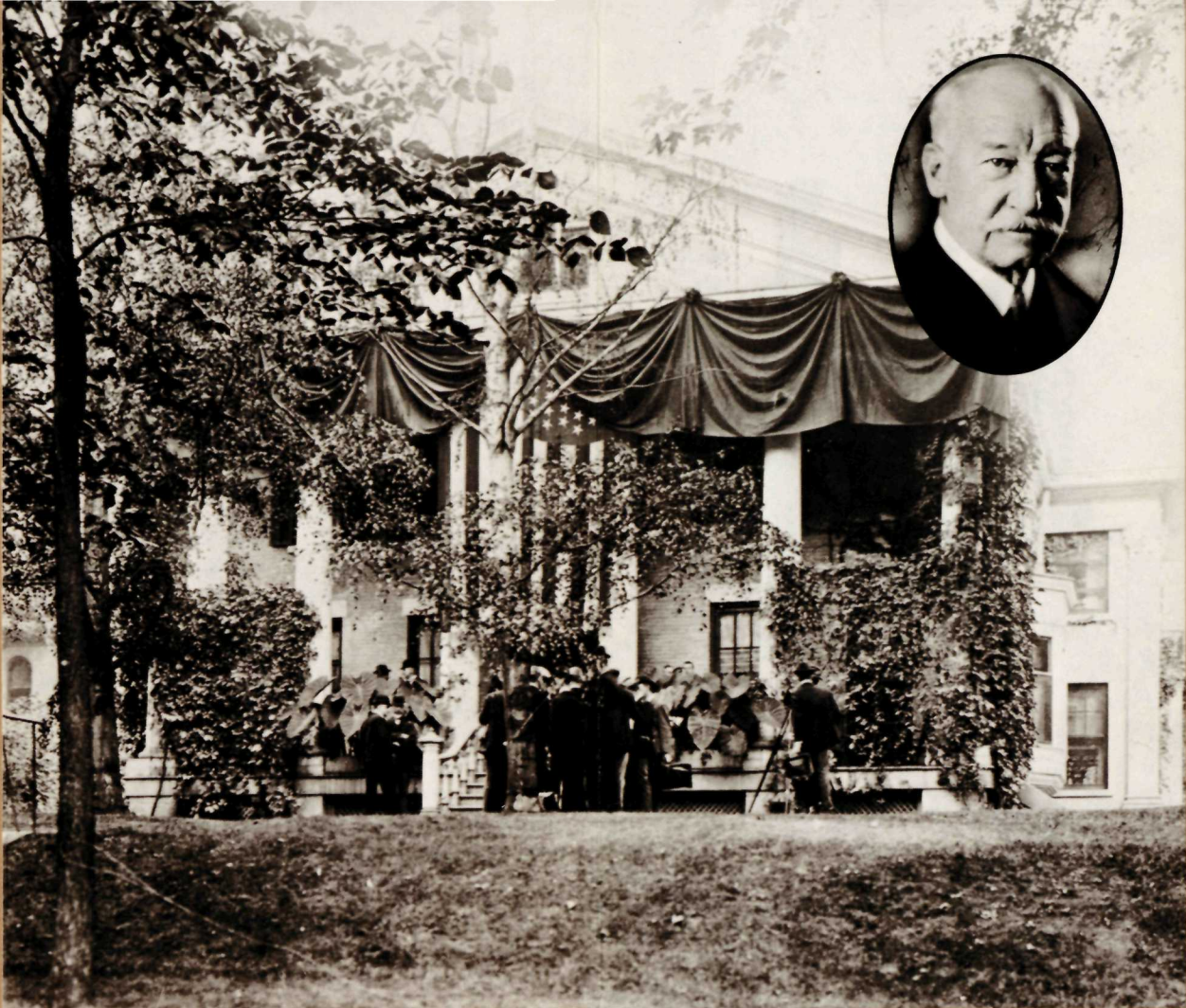
In his dash from the Adirondacks, the Vice President had not had time to gather up any of his formal attire. Somehow, from among those invited to witness the ceremony, he managed to acquire a long frock coat, gray trousers, a waistcoat, black four-in-hand tie, and a pair of black patent leather shoes. Thus attired at about 3:15 p.m. on Saturday, September 14, 1901, standing before Judge John R. Hazel of the U.S. District Court, Theodore Roosevelt took his 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. 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 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 an 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, Poinsett Barracks, was erected on it. A row of officers' quarters along Delaware Avenue 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 Poinsett Barracks later attained distinction. Among the commanding



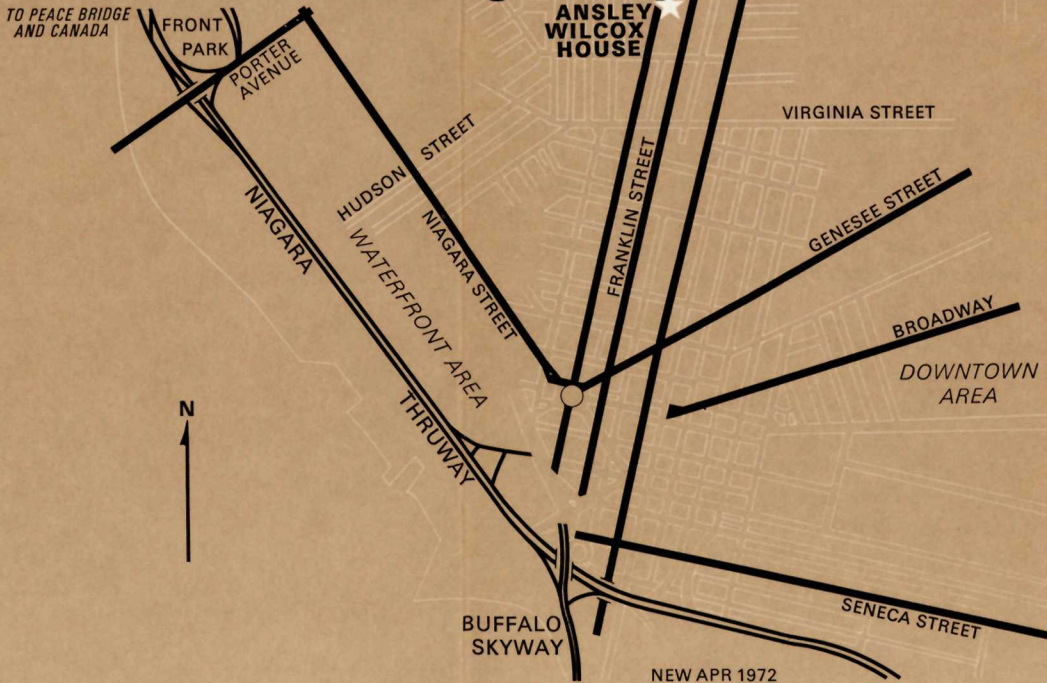
Reporters and photographers gather outside the Wilcox house on September 14, 1901, when Roosevelt was sworn in as 26th President of the United States. The inset shows Ansley Wilcox.

The library of the Wilcox house where Roosevelt took the oath of office.

officers who lived in the Wilcox house were Bennett Riley, later a Mexican War general and Territorial Governor of California, and Silas Casey, whose *System of Infantry Tactics* was adopted by the U.S. Army in 1862. Among the post surgeons was 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 Poinsett Barracks, and who must have frequented the house, included John C. Pemberton, Arnold Elzey, Samuel P. Heintzelman, Henry J. Hunt, and John Sedgwick, all of whom would attain distinction during the Civil War. Millard Fillmore, a prominent Buffalo resident and a future President of the United States, was also a frequent participant in the social life of the post.

When Poinsett Barracks was abandoned in the late 1840's, 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.



Previous owners had by this time built a frame addition at the rear of the building, and a brick coach house nearby. 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 1930's. After an attempt to raise funds to support the house as a memorial failed, it was then sold for use as a restaurant. In the 1960's, when the house was in danger of being demolished, local citizens campaigned to save the landmark and won. 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 inaugural ceremony.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The entrance to the house is on Delaware Avenue, near North Street. A parking area to the rear of the house can be reached from Franklin Street, a one-way street leading north from downtown Buffalo. The house is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Sunday from noon to 6 p.m. There is a small admission charge, which is waived for organized school groups.