

Introduction

Theodore Roosevelt's Life until 1877

Theodore Roosevelt was born in New York City on October 27, 1858, in a luxurious brownstone house near Gramercy Park. His father, Theodore Roosevelt Sr., was a partner in Roosevelt and Son with the Roosevelt family patriarch, the future president's grandfather Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt. Theodore Roosevelt Sr. was a great philanthropist in his day, helping found the Newsboys' Lodging House and Orthopedic Dispensary Hospital, as well as the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. During the Civil War, Roosevelt Sr. had paid a substitute rather than risk being conscripted into the army, a common practice among men of his class. Instead, he became one of three allotment commissioners, responsible for persuading soldiers to set aside part of their monthly pay for their families back home.

Theodore Roosevelt Sr.'s strong pro-Union sentiment inevitably clashed with his wife's sympathy for the Confederacy. Martha "Mittie" Bulloch Roosevelt had grown up on a classic Southern plantation in Georgia called Bulloch Hall, and had regaled her children with stories of slaves and the Old South. Mittie even had two brothers, Irving and James, who served in the Confederate Navy. Having been transplanted from rural Georgia to New York City, Mittie was something of an alien in such an urban setting. She lived in terror of dirt and of the contaminated food and water that could lead to typhus, a common and deadly malady of the nineteenth century.

Theodore Roosevelt was the second of four children born to Theodore Sr. and Mittie. Anna or "Bamie" was born only three years before him, but acted almost as a second mother to her younger siblings, always sitting and conferring with the "big people," as Theodore remembered. Elliott Roosevelt, born eighteen months after Theodore, was his brother's closest friend and

playmate during their childhood. Sister Corinne was born a year after Elliott, meaning that the three youngest children were born within a span of only three years. Illness plagued the children. Anna suffered from a spinal defect that required her wearing a painful harness. Elliott suffered seizures that, as he grew older, would make him turn to alcohol in an effort to control them. Theodore and Corinne both suffered from asthma and headaches. Theodore's frequent illness left him smaller than Elliott and turned him into something of an introvert. He spent many solitary hours observing insects, learning the Latin names of birds, and practicing taxidermy. Once Theodore's father implored his young son, "You must make your body." The boy took the order to heart, and it served as a guiding principle for the rest of his life.

For the Roosevelts, summers meant the countryside. Eventually Theodore Roosevelt Sr. acquired a summerhouse at Oyster Bay, Long Island, near the house of his father. Roosevelt remembered the time spent there with great joy. In the countryside the children rode horses, swam in and rowed on Long Island Sound, and tramped through the woods. On Long Island the young Theodore fed his growing interest in natural science, and his lifelong love of the outdoors.

The Roosevelt children did not attend school, so they were deprived of the social instruction afforded by the classroom and playground. Throughout Theodore's childhood his siblings and many cousins remained his only playmates, and the presence of strange boys—often bigger, stronger, and more aggressive—caused him great anxiety. Roosevelt drew great enjoyment and support from his close-knit family. Roosevelt's father was the dominant figure of the boy's life, and the younger Theodore remained close to his siblings—his sisters in particular—until the day he died.

The Roosevelt family took two grand tours of Europe, the first in 1869–70 as Theodore turned eleven, the second in 1872–73 when he turned fourteen. The first trip was troubled by Theodore's near-constant bouts of headaches, asthma, and homesickness. Later, in his memoirs, Roosevelt himself would note that this trip was colored by his immature "chauvinism and contempt" toward Europe, while the second trip reflected growing maturity, a sense of "discernment and appreciation," and a love of Germany cultivated during a long stay with a German family in Dresden. Roosevelt's direct boyhood contact with Europe was certainly important in the development of his ideas, both about America and the world. Roosevelt admired the art, history, and landscapes of England, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany.

For all of his appreciation of European art and scenery, young Theodore decried the poverty and filth he saw. This was ironic, as New York's lower wards were notorious for their abject poverty and mountains of garbage. During his childhood in New York, aside from trips with his father to the Newsboys' Lodging House, at the corner of Fulton and Nassau streets, Roosevelt had been largely shielded from such sights. Before Roosevelt had similar contact with New York's "other half" in the 1880s, the European trips probably were the boy's first close observations of real poverty.

During the family's second tour, Theodore and Elliott spent the summer of 1873 living with the Minckwitz family of Dresden, where they were immersed in German language and culture. This was when Roosevelt began a love affair with all things German that would last until the Great War. The choice of Germany, and Dresden in particular, was no accident. In the nineteenth century, German was the language of literature, history, and science. In New York, the German people were considered sober, cultured, and industrious. Unification having taken place two years before, Germany was an important European power. Finally, while Berlin was the political capital of the new country, Dresden was the German capital of art, music, science, and education. A beautiful city often compared to Florence, Dresden boasted some of Europe's best galleries, museums, and libraries. If Theodore Roosevelt Sr. was looking for a city to provide his children intellectual stimulation, he found it in Dresden.

Upon returning from the second grand tour, young Theodore began preparing for entrance into Harvard. In the winter of 1873, he began receiving tutoring from Harvard graduate Arthur Cutler with the single goal of passing the university admission exams. At the time, Harvard was undergoing expansion and curriculum changes. President Charles Eliot had instituted a controversial system of "electives" that allowed students to choose courses that simply interested them, such as botany and history. Such subjects might not have seemed to prepare America's top young men for careers in law, medicine, or business, but that was the point. The United States needed more than mere specialists. The country also needed men who could think.

The elective system also emphasized educating the individual student, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Eliot rejected the idea that schools should be merely factories of homogeneity. This seemed to reflect Roosevelt Sr.'s attitude toward raising his own children by cultivating their individuality and responding to each child's unique needs. His elder son's talent clearly lay with the natural sciences, and under Professor Louis Agassiz, Harvard had become the leading university in the field.

Harvard was more than just the university and the town of Cambridge. In Gilded Age America, Harvard meant Boston. The city of Boston and its ruling class must have figured prominently in the Roosevelts' decision that Theodore should attend Harvard. One reason was probably Boston's reputation as the "Athens of America," as *North American Review* founder William Tudor put it. For its small size, Boston boasted an enormous array of authors, poets, historians, artists, and scientists. Roosevelt's father perhaps viewed Boston as he regarded Dresden in Germany, not as the political or financial capital of the country, but as the cultural capital. Just as the European grand tours were meant to broaden and enrich his children's view of the world, sending his son to Boston was meant to make Theodore a refined and cultured gentleman.

The Boston Brahmins also shared the elder Roosevelt's sense of *noblesse oblige*, the understanding that wealth and power conferred responsibility for one's community. The elite Bostonians were also reformers. At the Republican

National Conventions in 1876 and 1880, the Massachusetts delegates stood against the choices of the party leaders and instead secured the nominations of Rutherford B. Hayes and dark horse James Garfield. By 1881 they had helped found the National Civil Service Reform League, backed by the quintessential Boston intellectual journal, *The North American Review*. For Theodore Roosevelt Sr., then, Harvard provided the perfect environment to educate his namesake. There he would rub elbows with the sons of the Boston elite and ingest their ideas on morality, culture, patronage, charity, and reform.

This was far from evident, however, as seventeen-year-old Roosevelt arrived at Harvard in September 1876. To a New Yorker, Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1876 appeared little more than a village. Three miles from Boston, Harvard Square was almost somnolent, the absolute quiet of the area disturbed only by the infrequent bells of the horse-drawn carriages. “Once in a while,” a contemporary observer wrote, “its dust is stirred by some mortuary procession of cattle on their way to the abattoirs.” The university and its buildings on their surrounding twenty-two acres dominated the town, just as the massive tower on the new Memorial Hall dominated the skyline. On Sundays the streets were even emptier than usual, as most of the Harvard men went into Boston to spend the Sabbath with their families. Roosevelt would usually spend these days teaching a Sunday school class, writing letters to his family, and collecting specimens of birds and toads.

At Harvard he fell in with some of the Boston crowd, joining a dining club for meals rather than partaking of the “uneatable” food in the student Commons. In addition to throwing himself into his studies—all required classes the freshman year, including Greek and Latin—he began boxing and wrestling. Although Roosevelt was frequently knocked down, he undertook these sports as ways to continue to “make his body,” as he had promised his father. During the first winter break at the end of 1876, he began a tradition of hosting some of his Boston chums in Manhattan. For Roosevelt, still something of an outsider in Boston, this must have proved a particularly enjoyable experience. Now Roosevelt could play guide in America’s greatest city, showing Bostonians the towers of the Brooklyn Bridge and taking them sleighing in Central Park. And at some point during that holiday break in New York, Roosevelt decided to again take up a habit he had not followed since he was fourteen. He began keeping a diary.