

## Getting To Know T.R. (Pre Roughrider Days)

### Childhood, education, and personal life



Theodore Roosevelt at age 11

Theodore Roosevelt was born in a [four-story brownstone at 28 East 20th Street](#), in the modern-day [Gramercy](#) section of [New York City](#), the second of four children of [Theodore Roosevelt, Sr.](#) (1831–1877) and [Mittie Bulloch](#) (1834–1884). He had an elder sister [Anna](#), nicknamed "Bamie" as a child and "Bye" as an adult for being always on the go; and two younger siblings—his brother [Elliott](#) (the father of [Eleanor Roosevelt](#)) and his sister [Corinne](#), (grandmother of [newspaper](#) columnists, [Joseph](#) and [Stewart Alsop](#)).

The Roosevelts had been in New York since the mid 18th century and had grown with the emerging New York commerce class after the [American Revolution](#). Unlike many of the earlier "log cabin Presidents," Roosevelt was born into a wealthy family. By the 19th century, the family had grown in wealth, power and influence from the profits of several businesses including hardware and plate-glass importing. The family was strongly [Democratic](#) in its political affiliation until the mid-1850s, then joined the new [Republican Party](#). Theodore's father, known in the family as "Thee", was a New York City [philanthropist](#), merchant, and partner in the family glass-importing firm Roosevelt and Son. He was a prominent supporter of [Abraham Lincoln](#) and the Union effort during the [American Civil War](#). His mother Mittie Bulloch was a Southern belle from a [slave-](#)owning family in [Savannah, Georgia](#) and had quiet [Confederate](#) sympathies. Mittie's brother, Theodore's uncle, [James Dunwoody Bulloch](#), was a [United States Navy](#) officer who became a Confederate admiral and naval procurement agent in Britain. Another uncle [Irvine Bulloch](#) was a midshipman on the Confederate raider, [CSS Alabama](#); both remained in England after the war.<sup>[7]</sup> From his grandparents' home, a young Roosevelt witnessed Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession in New York.

Sickly and [asthmatic](#) as a youngster, Roosevelt had to sleep propped up in bed or slouching in a chair during much of his early childhood, and had frequent ailments. Despite his illnesses, he was a hyperactive and often mischievous young man. His lifelong interest in [zoology](#) was formed at age seven upon seeing a dead [seal](#) at a local market. After obtaining the seal's head, the young Roosevelt and two of his cousins formed what they called the "Roosevelt Museum of Natural History". Learning the rudiments of [taxidermy](#), he filled his makeshift museum with many animals that he killed or caught, studied, and prepared for display. At age nine, he codified his observation of insects with a paper titled "The Natural History of Insects".<sup>[8]</sup>

To combat his poor physical condition, his father compelled the young Roosevelt to take up exercise. To deal with bullies, Roosevelt started [boxing](#) lessons.<sup>[9]</sup> Two trips abroad had a permanent impact: family tours of Europe in 1869 and 1870, and of the Middle East 1872 to 1873.

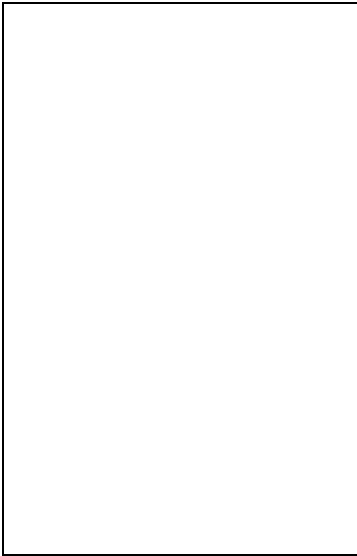
[Theodore Sr.](#) had a tremendous influence on his son. Of him Roosevelt wrote, "My father, Theodore Roosevelt, was the best man I ever knew. He combined strength and courage with gentleness, tenderness, and great unselfishness. He would not tolerate in us children selfishness or cruelty, idleness, cowardice, or untruthfulness."<sup>[10]</sup> Roosevelt's sister later wrote, "He told me frequently that he never took any serious step or made any vital decision for his country without thinking first what position his father would have taken."<sup>[11]</sup>

Young "Teedie", as he was nicknamed as a child, (the nickname "Teddy" was from his first wife, Alice Hathaway Lee, and he later harbored an intense dislike for it) was mostly home schooled by tutors and his parents. A leading biographer says: "The most obvious drawback to the home schooling Roosevelt keenly received was uneven coverage of the various areas of human knowledge." He was solid in geography (thanks to his careful observations on all his travels) and very well read in history, strong in [biology](#), [French](#) and [German](#), but deficient in [mathematics](#), [Latin](#) and [Greek](#).<sup>[12]</sup> He matriculated at [Harvard College](#) in 1876, graduating [magna cum laude](#). His father's death in 1878 was a tremendous blow, but Roosevelt redoubled his activities. He did well in [science](#), [philosophy](#) and [rhetoric](#) courses but fared poorly in Latin and Greek. He studied biology with great interest and indeed was already an accomplished naturalist and published [ornithologist](#). He had a [photographic memory](#) and developed a life-long habit of devouring books, memorizing every detail.<sup>[13]</sup> He was an eloquent conversationalist who, throughout his life, sought out the company of the smartest people. He could multitask in extraordinary fashion, dictating letters to one secretary and memoranda to another, while browsing through a new book.

While at Harvard, Roosevelt was active in rowing, boxing and the [Alpha Delta Phi](#) and [Delta Kappa Epsilon](#) fraternities. He also edited a student magazine. He was runner-up in the Harvard boxing championship, losing to [C.S. Hanks](#). The sportsmanship Roosevelt showed in that fight was long remembered. Upon graduating from Harvard, Roosevelt underwent a physical examination and his doctor advised him that due to serious heart

problems, he should find a desk job and avoid strenuous activity. Roosevelt chose to embrace strenuous life instead.<sup>[14]</sup>

He graduated [Phi Beta Kappa](#) and *magna cum laude* (22nd of 177) from Harvard in 1880, and entered [Columbia Law School](#). When offered a chance to run for [New York Assemblyman](#) in 1881, he dropped out of law school to pursue his new goal of entering public life.<sup>[15]</sup>



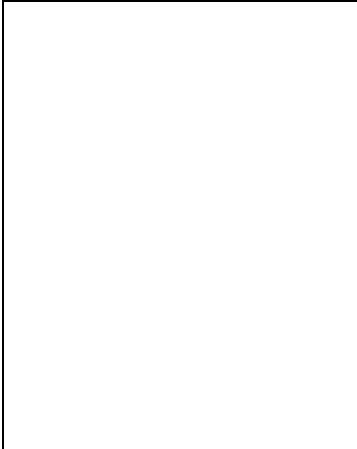
Roosevelt as NY State Assemblyman 1883, photo

Roosevelt was a [Republican](#) activist during his years in the Assembly, writing more bills than any other New York state legislator. Already a major player in state politics, he attended the Republican National Convention in 1884 and fought alongside the [Mugwump](#) reformers; they lost to the Stalwart faction that nominated [James G. Blaine](#). Refusing to join other Mugwumps in supporting Democrat [Grover Cleveland](#), the [Democratic](#) nominee, he debated with his friend [Henry Cabot Lodge](#) the plusses and minuses of staying loyal or straying. When asked by a reporter whether he would support Blain, Roosevelt replied that, "That question I decline to answer. It is a subject I do not care to talk about."<sup>[16]</sup> While Roosevelt complained, "[off the record](#)," about the Blain's nomination to a reporter upon leaving the convention, in probably the most crucial moment of his young political career, in 1884 the young Roosevelt resisted the very instinct to bolt from the Party that would overwhelm his political sense by 1912. When another reporter quoted Roosevelt saying that he had indicated that he would give "hearty support" to any decent democrat," in an account of the Convention, Roosevelt would later take great (and to some historical critics such as Henry Pringle, rather disingenuous) pains to distance himself from his own earlier comment by indicating that while he made it, it had not been made "for publication."<sup>[17]</sup>

## First marriage

[Alice Hathaway Lee Roosevelt](#) ([July 29, 1861](#) in [Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts](#) – [February 14, 1884](#) in [Manhattan, New York](#)) was the first wife of Theodore Roosevelt and mother of their only child together, [Alice Lee Roosevelt](#). Alice Roosevelt died of an undiagnosed case of [Bright's Disease](#) two days after Alice Lee was born. Theodore Roosevelt's mother Mittie died of [Typhoid fever](#) in the same house on the same day, Feb. 14, 1884. After the simultaneous deaths of his mother and wife, Roosevelt left his daughter in the care of his sister in New York and moved out to [Dakota Territory](#).

## Life in Badlands



Theodore Roosevelt as [Badlands](#) hunter in 1885. New York studio photo. Note the engraved knife and rifle courtesy of [Tiffany and Co.](#)

Roosevelt built a second ranch he named Elk Horn thirty five miles (56 km) north of the boomtown, [Medora, North Dakota](#). On the banks of the "Little Missouri," Roosevelt learned to ride, rope, and hunt. Roosevelt rebuilt his life and began writing about frontier life for Eastern magazines. As a deputy sheriff, Roosevelt hunted down three outlaws who stole his river boat and were escaping north with it up the [Little Missouri River](#). Capturing them, he decided against hanging them and sending his foreman back by boat, he took the thieves back overland for trial in [Dickinson](#), guarding them forty hours without sleep and reading Tolstoy to keep himself awake. When he ran out of his own books he read a dime store western one of the thieves was carrying. <sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup>

While working on a tough project aimed at hunting down a group of relentless horse thieves, Roosevelt came across the famous [Deadwood](#), [South Dakota Sheriff Seth Bullock](#). The two would remain friends for life. (Morris, Rise of, 241–245, 247–250)

After the uniquely severe U.S. [winter of 1886-1887](#) wiped out his herd of cattle and his \$60,000 investment (together with those of his competitors), he returned to the East, where in 1885, he had built [Sagamore Hill](#) in [Oyster Bay, New York](#). It would be his home and estate until his death. Roosevelt ran as the Republican candidate for mayor of New York City in 1886 as "The Cowboy of the Dakotas." He came in third.

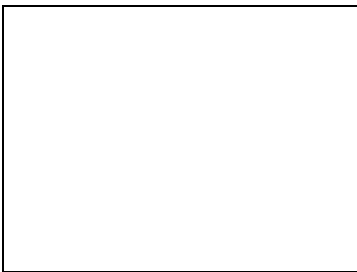
## Second marriage

Following the election, he went to London in 1886 and married his childhood sweetheart, [Edith Kermit Carow](#).<sup>[18]</sup> They honeymooned in Europe, and Roosevelt led a party to the summit of [Mont Blanc](#), a feat which resulted in his induction into the [British Royal Society](#).<sup>[19]</sup> They had five children: [Theodore Jr.](#), [Kermit](#), [Ethel Carow](#), [Archibald Bulloch](#) "Archie", and [Quentin](#).<sup>[20]</sup>

## Historian

Roosevelt's book *The Naval War of 1812* (1882) was standard history for two generations. Roosevelt undertook extensive and original research even computing British and American [man-of-war broadside](#) throw weights.<sup>[21]</sup> By comparison, however, his hastily-written biographies of [Thomas Hart Benton](#) (1887) and [Gouverneur Morris](#) (1888) are considered superficial.<sup>[22]</sup> His major achievement was a four-volume history of the frontier, *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896), which had a notable impact on [historiography](#) as it presented a highly original version of the [frontier thesis](#) elaborated upon in 1893 by his friend [Frederick Jackson Turner](#). Roosevelt argued that the harsh frontier conditions had created a new "race": the American people that replaced the "scattered savage tribes, whose life was but a few degrees less meaningless, squalid, and ferocious than that of the wild beasts with whom they held joint ownership". He believed that "the conquest and settlement by the whites of the Indian lands was necessary to the greatness of the race and to the well-being of civilized mankind". He was using an evolutionary model in which new environmental conditions allow a new species to form. His many articles in upscale magazines provided a much-needed income, as well as cementing a reputation as a major national intellectual. He was later chosen president of the [American Historical Association](#).

## Return to public life



New York City Police Commissioner 1896

In the [1888 presidential election](#), Roosevelt campaigned in the Midwest for [Benjamin Harrison](#). President Harrison appointed Roosevelt to the [United States Civil Service Commission](#), where he served until 1895.<sup>[24]</sup> In his term, he vigorously fought the [spoilsmen](#) and demanded the enforcement of civil service laws. In spite of Roosevelt's support for Harrison's reelection bid in the [presidential election of 1892](#), the eventual

winner, [Grover Cleveland](#) (a [Bourbon Democrat](#)), re appointed him to the same post.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup>

Roosevelt became president of the board of [New York City Police Commissioners](#) in 1895. During the two years he held this post, Roosevelt radically reformed the police department. The police force was reputed as one of the most corrupt in America. NYPD's history division records Roosevelt was, "an iron-willed leader of unimpeachable honesty, (who) brought a reforming zeal to the New York City Police Commission in 1895."<sup>[25]</sup> Roosevelt and his fellow commissioners established new disciplinary rules, created a bicycle squad to police New York's traffic problems and standardized the use of pistols by officers.<sup>[26]</sup> Roosevelt implemented regular inspections of firearms, annual physical exams, appointed 1,600 new recruits based on their physical and mental qualifications and not on political affiliation, opened the department to ethnic minorities and women, established meritorious service medals, and shut down corrupt police hostelrys. During his tenure a Municipal Lodging House was established by the Board of Charities and Roosevelt required officers to register with the Board. He also had telephones installed in station houses. Always an energetic man, he made a habit of walking officers' beats late at night and early in the morning to make sure they were on duty.<sup>[27]</sup> He became caught up in public disagreements with commissioner Parker, who sought to negate or delay the promotion of many officers put forward by Roosevelt.<sup>[[citation needed](#)]</sup>

### Assistant Secretary of the Navy



□

Assistant Secretary of the Navy Roosevelt (front center) at the Naval War College, c. 1897

Roosevelt had always been fascinated by naval history. Urged by Roosevelt's close friend, Congressman [Henry Cabot Lodge](#), President [William McKinley](#) appointed a delighted Roosevelt to the post of [Assistant Secretary of the Navy](#) in 1897. (Because of the inactivity of [Secretary of the Navy John D. Long](#) at the time, this basically gave Roosevelt control over the department.) Roosevelt was instrumental in preparing the Navy for the [Spanish-American War](#)<sup>[28]</sup> and was an enthusiastic proponent of testing the U.S. military in battle, at one point stating "I should welcome almost any war, for I think this country needs one".<sup>[29][30]</sup>