



Presidential Digitization Project Prompts Memory Institution Collaboration in Theodore Roosevelt Research

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ABSTRACT

Long Island University's Roosevelt House received a grant from the National Historic Publications and Records Commission to digitize private documentary materials predating the Presidential Library system. The project has fostered a working relationship with Sagamore Hill National Historic Site and a collaboration between librarians, archivists, and museumologists. A Library and Information Science graduate student's internship reflections contribute commentary on the notion of LAM convergence and archival relevance in refreshing a nation's collective memory. Specific artifact research concerning a photo album details the rediscovery process of the unadvertised truth behind the teddy bear stuffed toy created after Theodore Roosevelt's 1902 Mississippi bear hunt and the potential of future archival findings from the digitization project's advancement.

A Student Museum Archivist carefully yields a microspatula to turn a brittle page under the glare of angled LED lights. The graduate student is working with the official Museum Archivist in the Digitization Lab at the Roosevelt House, located on Long Island University Post's campus. The artifact positioned on the capture cradle before them has snake weights delicately draped over the leaf's verso to properly expose a new leaf to the camera's field of view. The camera whirls overhead trying to focus and signals success with a definitive *click*. On the computer screen the Capture One software reveals a high-quality image of Theodore Roosevelt's family scrapbook. The 26th President of the United States' personal family records are being digitized.

My graduate assistantship with the Roosevelt House during the 2025 Summer Session let me join a cataloging and digitization team comprised of the Museum Archivist, Conservator, and fellow Student Museum Archivists. The project is funded by a grant from the National Historic Publications and Records Commission to digitize the "private documentary collections of the American Presidential Family Descendents prior to President Hoover."^[1] The ultimate goal is to design a virtual Presidential Library database that allows users to search and explore presidential family collections that predate 1929. The significance of this pursuit is that the current breadth of the Presidential Library system is 16 Presidential Libraries from Hoover to Biden.

^[2] Congress passed the Presidential Libraries Act in 1955 which encouraged presidents to donate presidential materials for archival depositories and in 1978 was revised to federally claim presidential papers as property of the United States Government.^[3] The act does not include private documentation from past presidential families, which creates a significant hole in the nation's collective memory and identity. My work with the Roosevelt family artifacts included digitizing World War II photographs of gas masks and aircraft rifle scopes. I transcribed letters that were in the family's possession from George Washington and Abraham Lincoln for descriptive metadata creation. These artifacts suggest presidential family collections before the stipulations of the Presidential Library Act possess the potential to contain unique and varied documentation, further increasing the need for its digitization. Presidential artifacts predating the Presidential Libraries Act are regarded as either dispersed, "destroyed or lost in history."^[4] The Roosevelt House digitization project seeks to mend this gap

through a centralized organization of early presidential artifacts with special attention to familial collections.

The project's current focus is Theodore Roosevelt and the Roosevelt family legacy. *Library Journal* reported in 2018 that plans to create a Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library stalled, preventing the papers of a president with a "storied legacy" from being housed for public appreciation and discovery.^[5] Eight years later it appears the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library is expected to open in the summer of 2026 in Medora, North Dakota.^[6] Most Roosevelt papers are currently divided amongst special collections at "the Library of Congress, Harvard University's Houghton Library, the National Park Service, and Sagamore Hill National Historic Site (Roosevelt's New York birthplace)."^[7] Sagamore Hill National Historic Site is the first to offer their archives to the Roosevelt House's presidential digitization project. Batches of the Sagamore Hill collection are transported to the Roosevelt House through a loan agreement with the National Park Service.

Collaboration between Sagamore Hill and LIU demonstrates the mutually beneficial relationship achieved when institutions and local historical museums partner to pool their resources for a shared goal. In June 2025, I visited Sagamore Hill National Historic Site to interview Clare Connelly, the Chief of Cultural Resources at the time. Clare explained that Sagamore Hill had "done haphazard digitization in the past, but to have this large-scale project where we make sure the metadata is well organized and maintained is just absolutely wonderful. Unfortunately we never really had the resources to do it ourselves."^[8] Together LIU assists Sagamore Hill in establishing the bandwidth to digitize and catalogue its artifacts. The Roosevelt house supplies the professional expertise and equipment to properly digitize then encode descriptive and archival metadata. The grant project also provides graduate students like myself the opportunity to receive hands-on training in the Digitization Lab. In return, Sagamore Hill provides the artifacts, many of which have not been unboxed in years, giving graduate students another opportunity to conduct niche research. Convergence between librarians, archivists, and museumologists advances the mission of all the involved organizations. A challenge in the partnership dynamic emerged this fall. Communication with

Sagamore Hill was temporarily paused during the 43-day government shutdown that occurred from October 1, 2025 to November 12, 2025. During the shutdown, I attempted to culminate my research from the Roosevelt House and hoped to speak with the project's designated contact at Sagamore Hill. The shutdown enforced a communication barrier as the Old Orchard Museum at Sagamore Hill was temporarily closed and staff was temporarily unavailable. The 43-day stretch marked a hindrance to academic research and public access to knowledge that was notably out of Sagamore Hill's control.

The convergence between libraries, archives, and museums (LAM) has been an observed and increasingly discussed phenomenon. I am an emerging librarian, rather than an archivist, but I was able to participate in this archival project thanks to the Palmer School's mission. Palmer's LIS curriculum acknowledges the convergence of LAM and the need to "produce professionals ready to address new challenges in managing cultural heritage information."^[9] While librarians, archivists, and museumologists maintain distinct roles, digitization projects "enable increasingly greater degrees of collaboration."^[10] A study of European LAM professionals reported that "73% of museologists have collaborated with libraries and/or archives."^[11] It appears that in the changing landscape of the heritage information sector combined support from librarians, archivists, and museumologists is essential for the continued accessibility of detailed and accurate historical information.

My research focused on a leather-bound photo album. The album opened to reveal a white-chalk script on the paste-down endpaper that titled the album "President Roosevelt's Bear Hunt on Little Sunflower River Issaquena County, Mississippi."^[12] The photographs curate a glimpse into Roosevelt's 1902 bear hunt that inspired the teddy bear stuffed toy. The origin of the teddy bear has been infused into the American collective memory as a noble story where Roosevelt, the big-game hunter, refuses to shoot a bear cub that was captured by his men. My research focus tracked archival documentation of the 1902 trip to compare the American tale with Sagamore Hill's preserved facts.

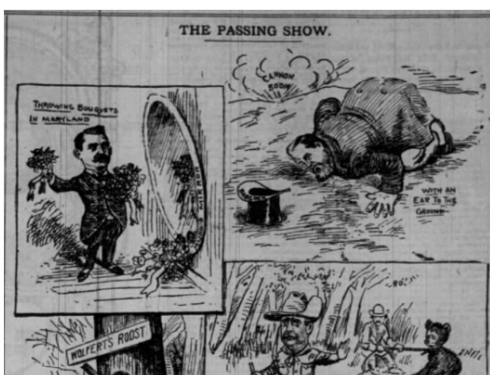
The cultural myth of Roosevelt's mercy towards the bear cub comes from Clifford

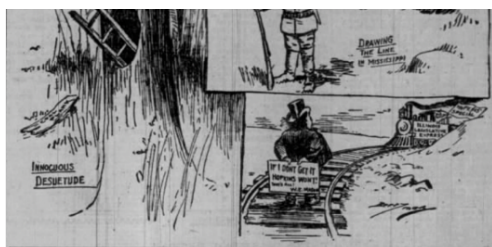
K. Berryman's political cartoon. It has become a well-recognized fixture in American history.^[13] The cartoon has been accepted as a commentary on T.R.'s sportsmanship. The caption suggests Roosevelt drew an ethical line where his companions had not. It depictsThe cartoon's caption leads to the assumption that the bear cub was saved, and that from Roosevelt's compassion, the teddy bear was born. generate the assumption that the bear cub was saved and from T.R.'s compassion the teddy bear was born.



Above Image: "Drawing the Line in the Mississippi." By Clifford K. Berryman. Image from the National Park Service.

What is less widely known is that this popularized cartoon is a variant of Berryman's original work. *The Washington Post* published Sunday, November 16, 1902, portrays a collection of political cartoons with a larger bear featured in "Drawing the Line in Mississippi."^[14]





Above Image: “The Passing Show.” By Clifford K. Berryman. Image from The Washington Post.

Berryman seemingly redrew the cartoon after its publication. The changes in the bear’s size can evoke different levels of empathy from the viewer. In the variant drawing the bear appears as a cub, suggested by the man’s arms holding the rope at a downward angle and the bear’s ears marking a height below the man’s shoulders. Conversely, in the original cartoon the man is holding the rope at a leveled angle and the bear’s ears measure above the man’s shoulders. Roosevelt’s refusal to kill a bear cub is an arguably stronger visual than an adult bear. The purpose of the cartoon’s revision is unknown. It could have been intentional for Roosevelt’s political gain, an alteration to more accurately resemble the facts, or merely a circumstantial design change. The cartoons add doubt to the teddy bear story— was the bear actually a cub? The Sagamore Hill archives helped piece together the truth.

The first photograph in the photo album (SAHI11216_0001) depicts the 1902 hunting party. Holt Collier, known as Uncle Holt, is standing nearly centered with a drawn arrow identifying him as “Holt Collier / The head hunts-man.”^[15]



Above Image: "The Party." Source: Sagamore Hill National Historic Site Photo Album.

SAHI11216_0001. Record from The Roosevelt House, Brookville, NY.

As head huntsman, Collier was responsible for strategically positioning Roosevelt in spots where he had the best chance for a clean shot. Newspapers later interviewed Collier for his expert testimony after the infamous bear hunt. A research file opened at Sagamore Hill during my meeting with Connelly included an uncited scanned article clipping dated January 5, 1932. It quotes Collier recalling that the bear from the trip as a "big gray bear weighin' 'bout 600 pounds."^[16] His description of an adult bear, thirty-years after the event, contradicts the imagery from Berryman's revised cartoon and front-page news stories from 1902. *The Washington Post* published the article "One Bear Bagged" November 14, 1902, with the lede "A lean black bear, which weighs 235 pounds, is hanging up at the President's camp on the Little Sunflower" as the first trophy of the hunt.^[17] That same day another Washington, D.C. publication *The Evening Star* mentions no big-game success, but that a "second bear followed by the hounds yesterday afternoon turned out to be a cub."^[18] Where is the photographic proof to support the infamous story of T.R.'s sportsmanship?

Tweed Roosevelt, the great-grandson of T.R., is credited with the evidentiary counter to the American tale. In 1989 Tweed found in Harvard University's Theodore Roosevelt Collection a photograph that shows "a dead bear strapped to a horse" from the 1902 Mississippi hunting trip.^[19] Douglas Brinkley's article "The Myth of the Great

Bear Hunt” claims to be the source to first publicly publish the photograph in 2000. That same photograph is in the Sagamore Hill photo album, image SAHI11216_0014.^[20]



Above Image: The Bear Roosevelt Refused to Shoot. Source: Sagamore Hill National Historic Site Photo Album. SAHI11216_0014. Record from the Roosevelt House, Brookville, NY.

The photograph confirms that the bear was not a cub. Written records confirm Roosevelt refused to shoot the bear as Collier said Roosevelt “would never take an unsportmanship advantage of the beast”^[21] A processing memo of the bear’s fur reveals that the bear was “Struck on head by Holt Collier with his rifle.”^[22] Tweed adds that the “bear with Roosevelt wasn’t shot, but was knifed to death.”^[23]

The twenty photos in the Sagamore Hill photo album were then cross-referenced with Harvard Library’s digitized Theodore Roosevelt collection to gauge originality. The comparison suggests that the photographs are copies. Out of 22 images digitized from the Sagamore Hill’s photo album, 12 were discoverable in HOLLIS Images, Harvard Library’s image catalog. This leads to the belief that Harvard may possess a version of all the photographs contained in Sagamore Hill’s photo album, but it remains an unverifiable claim without the possession of a Harvard affiliate sign in to explore the catalog beyond open access parameters.

The remaining mystery is what happened to the fur of the infamous bear after the

hunting trip. I worked with Sagamore Hill to research the unidentified taxidermy bear furs within Sagamore Hill's collection. Three furs have remained unidentified including two black furs and one gray fur. Further steps have been taken to investigate with a taxidermist conservator if the 1902 Mississippi bear could be one of these furs. The evidence remains circumstantial. A fellow researcher shared the trip's processing memos which suggest that the physical dimensions of Sagamore Hill's bear furs do not match recorded measurements. Whether or not the bear furs can be linked to the 1902 Mississippi bear hunt does not diminish the prospect of what can be accomplished from the reexamination of artifacts. The research emphasizes the exact importance of digitization projects and LAM collaboration to refresh a community and nation's collective memory.

LIU's Roosevelt House partnership with Sagamore Hill National Historic Site has allowed a simple family photo album to stimulate research and contribute to Roosevelt's cultural narrative. The larger goal of transforming digitized presidential familial collections into a digital resource will require the continual effort of libraries, archives, and museums. The legacy and preservation of presidential materials predating Hoover necessitates the dedication of these memory institutions and the curiosity of LAM graduate student researchers.

Author Bio:

Emma Graff is the ALA Student Chapter Leader for the Palmer School of Library and Information Science. She is graduating in December with her Master's of Science degree in Library and Information Science with a Youth Librarianship concentration. She has been accumulating library experience as an Adult Services Librarian Trainee for over a year at South Huntington Public Library and previously was a Children's Services Librarian Trainee for half a year. Through the Gardiner Foundation Master's Fellowship with the East Hampton Library and the completed Graduate Assistantship as a Student Museum Archivist with LIU's Roosevelt House, Emma has gained archives management, research, and digitization project experience.

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