Georgia History in Pictures
Shaping a Presidential Image: FDR in Georgia

BY KAYE LANNING MINCHEW

A study of photographs made of Franklin D. Roosevelt during his visits to Georgia between 1924 and 1945, together with an

In a newspaper interview on October 18, 1930, Roosevelt accepted a $500,000 life insurance policy in favor of the Georgia Warm Springs Foundation, whose medical director praised the governor’s physical condition. In answering a reporter’s questions about how he maintained his health, FDR credited his daily swims and his horseback rides. Photo from the Little White House.

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analysis of interviews with people who remember the president, reveal several distinct photographic periods. The first focused on Roosevelt’s recovery from polio and the early development of the Warm Springs Foundation. The second consisted of a campaign to show Georgians and the nation that he enjoyed great health. A third period showed a man getting away to Georgia to rest from the rigors of the presidency as he lead the nation out of the Depression. In the fourth era, as commander-in-chief of a nation at war, Roosevelt had little time to spend in Georgia and, unfortunately, little time to enjoy the beneficial, healing effects of the Foundation. Roosevelt died in Georgia in April 1945.

In 1920, Franklin D. Roosevelt seemed to have it all. Despite running unsuccessfully for vice president on the Democratic ticket with James F. Cox, his political star was rising. His fifth cousin Theodore Roosevelt had served as the nation’s twenty-sixth president and his own career bore a strong resemblance to his cousin’s: both had served in the New York legislature and as an assistant secretary of the U.S. Navy. Then in August 1921, the thirty-eight-year-old father of five contracted polio during a summer trip to Campobello, Maine. Polio dealt a huge blow to his system: he never again walked without assistance and overnight this tall, healthy New Yorker became dependent on others in most aspects of life.

For much of the 1920s, Roosevelt poured his energies into recuperating and relearning to walk. At the time, doctors knew little about polio or its treatment and many victims spent their days in back bedrooms. Indeed, Sarah Roosevelt, Franklin’s mother, wanted him to come home to Hyde Park and be a “Squire,” presiding over his country estate of Springwood. Instead, Roosevelt sought treatment in Massachusetts and spent much time in the warm waters of the South Atlantic off the coast of Florida. In October 1924, he visited Warm Springs, Georgia, on the recommendation of George Foster Peabody. Roosevelt enjoyed the 88 degree waters of the pools and after three weeks felt his legs had improved more than they had in the previous three years. After Cleborne Gregory wrote an article for the Atlanta Journal magazine on October 26, 1924, entitled “Swimming his way to health,” Warm Springs developed into a polio treatment center with Roosevelt as its founding father. Photographs of Roosevelt during the 1921-1928 era often show him in the swimming pool (usually
A familiar view of Roosevelt in the 1920s places him in the swimming pool with fellow patients. Paul Rogers recalled his first visit to Warm Springs in 1925 or 1926: "I came down and . . . we had no regular treatment although they did get us physical therapists and so we had treatment down at the old public pool . . . in general, building up of health and being able to use what [muscles] I had left." Photo from Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

at Warm Springs), sitting in the sun, or with advisors or fellow polio patients as he spent seven years trying to recover from the debilitating effects of the disease.

Between 1924 and 1945, Roosevelt visited Georgia and Warm Springs forty-one times. In the early years, his days evolved around exercises at the pools and absorbing the strong rays of the sun. FDR generally visited in the spring in late-March and April and again in the fall, arriving in time to spend Thanksgiving with the patients. He spent mornings swimming in the pool and sitting in the sun. Thanks to swimming and exercises recommended by bodyguard Gus Gennerich, he developed significant upper body

1Rexford G. Tugwell, Warm Springs Oral History Interviews, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.
In a relaxed moment, Roosevelt enjoys playing with children outside his Warm Springs cottage. Claude Bray, Jr., later a state representative from Meriwether County, remembers that "the children were just drawn to Roosevelt because he loved them and children can sense when you like them ... he was their buddy ... he was an inspiration to them. He taught them that here at Warm Springs ... disabilities can be prevented from becoming handicaps." 2 Courtesy of Columbus Ledger-Enquirer.

strength and muscles. In the afternoons, Roosevelt caught up on correspondence and went for drives in the west Georgia countryside. Though he found an area suffering from a depression as boll weevils devoured much of the cotton being produced and cotton prices plummeted, he quickly grew to love the hospitable people. He easily made friends with local residents and often stopped to chat with people in their yards as he drove past.

In mid-September 1928, FDR left New York for a Georgia visit. Despite being pressured to run for governor, he felt the timing was wrong to restart his political career and realized that his physical progress would be slowed by new demands on his time. He made speeches in his adopted state on behalf of fellow New Yorker, Al Smith, the Democratic nominee for president of the United States.

He wrote Eleanor on September 30 that:

I have to stay here to make a speech to a big meeting in Columbus on Thursday, then go on Friday straight to Cleveland. . . . I spoke in Atlanta twice last Wednesday and there is an appalling amount of vile propaganda in circulation all through the South. Still I think Smith will carry these states.

I had a difficult time turning down the Governorship, letters and telegrams by the dozen begging me to save the situation by running, but I have been perfectly firm. I only hope they don't try to

Arthur Carpenter (right), business manager at Warm Springs, and Les Kibbe join Roosevelt as he turns on the water above the Foundation. Carpenter’s son Robert remembers: “Roosevelt was a big man... he was like my father. All polio victims over time developed tremendous shoulders and upper body strength—literally walking with their arms and shoulders, carrying all that weight.”

Photo from Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute.

stampede the Convention tomorrow and nominate me and then adjourn!

Ever so much love.

Your devoted

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On October 2, after being tracked down giving a speech in nearby Manchester, Roosevelt reluctantly allowed his name to be submitted to the Democratic convention and sent a telegram to Oliver Cabana, chair of the State Democratic Convention of New York:

Please give the convention this message. Every personal and family consideration has been and is against my becoming the candidate of the convention but if by accepting I can help the splendid cause of our beloved governor I will yield to your judgement. I will continue in this campaign to do everything possible for the state and national ticket. If elected, I shall give my best service to the

maintenance of the high example set during all these years by Governor Smith and to the furtherance of the cause of good government in the State of New York.  

Using visual tricks such as leaning against cars or walking with his arm on one of his sons' elbows, Roosevelt appeared physically fit before the public, though not everyone believed what they saw. Following his nomination as Democratic governor of New York in 1928, Roosevelt endured veiled threats on his physical abilities. Republicans declared: "He is lauded for his public spirit in accepting the nomination against his personal inclination and the advice of his physician . . . general health excellent, mental capacity and vigor are great. If he cannot walk with entire freedom, the people of this state can make sympathetic allowances for him." Such comments fueled FDR's desire to appear fit. He continued to campaign for Al Smith and asked the voters of New York state for their support. He was elected governor of New York that November and again two years later though the national Democratic ticket suffered defeat.

As governor of New York, FDR became the leading contender for the Democratic nomination for president in 1932. Expecting that his record as governor, along with his work as assistant secretary of the Navy during World War I and as a state representative, would indicate his abilities to govern, Roosevelt and his allies launched a concerted effort to convince the American public that he was physically capable of doing the job. Roosevelt's second home in Georgia provided the perfect backdrop for his campaign as an active man. Georgians loved him and strongly supported his bid for the presidency. On April 24, 1925, Henry Revill, editor of the Meriwether Vindicator declared that

He is truly great in the things that make men great. He has a brilliant mind and a big heart. . . . Mr. Roosevelt has the appearance of a great big boy, with a countenance that at once captures you with its sincerity and perpetual smile. . . . History will, in our opinion, record the fact that another Roosevelt whose given name is Franklin, was president of the United States.

4Columbus Ledger, October 2, 1928.
5Atlanta Journal, October 3, 1928.
Georgia provided ideal locations for this campaign. Roosevelt sought both improved health and rest from the rigors of everyday life. Active, healthy people went fishing, hunting, horseback riding and golfing in their leisure time. The press assisted with this campaign, though perhaps unintentionally. They accompanied Roosevelt on his trips but respected his privacy. Even after he became governor of New York and president of the United States, photographs were made only at specific times and were often staged. Roosevelt also harbored a plan to develop Warm Springs into a resort for the wealthy. People could come, enjoy the Springs, build cottages, and golf or play tennis. Louis Howe, a close friend and confidant of Roosevelt, suggested the resort idea as a way of gaining financial security for Warm Springs. He advised FDR on every significant political move until his death in 1936.

Uncertainty remains about whether Roosevelt actually enjoyed fishing, hunting or horseback riding or did these as publicity stunts to prove his physical fitness. Ernest Lindley, a newspaper-

In November 1931, Roosevelt discussed Warm Springs activities, and possibly a campaign contribution, with Bernarr Macfadden. The public knew Macfadden as a “health nut” who championed physical exercise and diet reform as publisher of Physical Culture, a popular magazine. While at Warm Springs, he visited with the governor, swam, and studied patient treatment. Photo by Snelson Davis, courtesy of Troup County Archives.
While driving in 1930, Roosevelt stopped to chat with Hugh Love and Walter Carpenter, Jr. In his "secret diary," Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes noted that "the President is always charming but he was delightful at Warm Springs. Everyone there loves him, and crowds hang outside the gate... just to see him and cheer him.... I have never had contact with a man who was loved as he is. To the people of Warm Springs he is just a big jolly brother." Photo above by Blasingame, at bottom from the Little White House.

man for the *New York Herald Tribune* who often traveled to Warm Springs, wrote in 1931 that “since he became Governor, he has taken up horseback riding again, and has begun to develop a grip with his knees—although he still keeps the horse at a walk.”

Conversely, in *This I Remember*, Eleanor Roosevelt recalls:

Earl Miller, who at that time was a New York State trooper, thought my husband should learn to ride horseback again, as many of the patients at Warm Springs had, and he insisted that it would be a good thing if Miss LeHand and I rode too. . . . Missy was a much better pupil than I. It took me a long time to gain enough confidence to learn to ride astride, for I had always ridden side saddle. . . . Finally, however, riding became a pleasure which I continued to enjoy . . . for

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Roosevelt visits with an unidentified boy and his dog. William Hanson, an area resident, remembers talking to him when Hanson was about twelve. "He always liked children. He asked what we were going to be when we grew up . . . [and told us] ‘Well whatever you are going to be, be prepared to give more to your country than has ever been given before.’"

*Photo from Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.*

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*Franklin Roosevelt: Poor Man’s Friend.*
several years. . . . My husband was not able to get any pleasure out of riding after he became paralyzed, though he had been a fine horseman. He rode with Earl Miller in Warm Springs and at Hyde Park, but he never got over his sense of insecurity in the saddle, because he could not use the muscles necessary to balance himself on a horse."9

In addition to horseback riding, Roosevelt went fishing, played with children, and participated in a widely celebrated possum hunt on November 29, 1930. Martha Tigner recalls the dinner. "It got so big with Democrats all over wanting to come that they decided to have it at the White Sulphur Springs hotel."10 Martha's father, J. Hope, a member of the Atlanta Association of Owners and Builders, had once owned the hotel located west of Warm Springs. Newspapers reported that this was the first possum Roosevelt ever consumed though the governor said several years earlier that he had possum on his first trip to Georgia when he visited Brunswick in 1913, investigating possible use of the port by the U.S. Navy. Along with the possum and taters, other items on the menu included "Meriwether Baked Plymouth Hen," hot biscuits, sweet potato pudding, and pecan pie. Clark Howell, editor of the Atlanta Constitution, sent an introduction that read: "Unless I am greatly mistaken, you are entertaining the next president of the United States."11

Miss Tigner reported that "Many of Atlanta's most prominent folks were there . . . they put on a really good show. . . . Everybody got up and made speeches. . . . Roosevelt talked about differences between hospitality in Georgia and other places in the East. . . . Everybody had a good time." Roosevelt mentioned that on his first visit to Warm Springs, he was greeted by locals and welcomed with a kitchen full of food. Ruth Stevens recalled: "He spoke of going to a town in New England where no one came to meet him nor to see him, nor did they give a cordial 'Howdy.' He paid a glowing tribute to our people and said he was always glad to come to his Georgia home. He said that he hoped to spend more time at his Warm Springs home . . . and that he would employ all his efforts in the interest of progress in this section."12

9Eleanor Roosevelt, This I Remember (New York, 1949), 28.
11Meriwether Vindicator, December 5, 1930.
12Ruth Stevens, Hi-Ya Neighbor (New York, 1947), 38.
In the days just before a possum hunt in 1930, J. Hope Tigner took his family to Warm Springs to finalize plans. As her sister Adalaide looks on, Martha and Roosevelt pull the tails of two possums. Martha reported that this was “the only possum I ever had contact with. . . . I never held a possum. . . . I’d never seen one before but I said I’d hold one.” A man put the possums in the tree and instructed Miss Tigner and Roosevelt to hold the critters.13 Georgian American photo.

In all, 169 attended, including Georgia governor Richard B. Russell, and non-Georgians Missy LeHand, New Yorker Edward Flynn and his wife, and reporters from the New York American and the New York World. Charles F. Palmer, an Atlanta developer and president of the association, acted as toastmaster. Palmer later spearheaded development of Techwood and University Homes, Atlanta slum-clearance projects. Eleanor Roosevelt and her friend Nancy Cook attended though few of the reports mentioned her and Miss Tigner does not remember meeting her. According to Miss Tigner, the hosts, the Atlanta Association of Owners and Builders, (correctly) figured no one else would honor the governor with a possum dinner. They were following a short-lived Georgia tradition. On January 15, 1909, Georgians treated President-elect William Howard Taft to a possum and taters dinner at the Atlanta auditorium and armory.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Roosevelt went deep-sea fishing and fished on Georgia's lakes and rivers. He probably enjoyed the time outdoors while also appearing before cameras as an active, healthy man. This May 1930 photo was made at the Flint River area of Meriwether County known as "the Cove." Photo from Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

Photographs of Roosevelt participating in similar activities, including riding, fishing, or hunting in Georgia, after he was elected president have not been found. Even photos of him playing with children become scarcer as he was more likely to be photographed visiting with young polio victims. Certainly, as president of the United States, he had less free time than ever before. In addition, the urgency of showing FDR as an active, healthy man had lessened. Through New Deal activities and other legislation, he had begun to lead Americans out of the Depression. Thanks to national media coverage, public appearances, and radio addresses such as his famous fireside chats, Americans felt like they knew their president. Photographs from 1933 until Roosevelt died in 1945, as well as oral history interviews, reveal a public speaker, a person meeting with advisors, family, or friends, and a man at ease visiting with polio patients rather than a man frequenting rivers, golf courses, or possum hunts.
Roosevelt grew up riding horses. After he suffered from polio, horseback riding helped circulation in his legs. Turnley Walker reported that Roosevelt and Fred Botts, registrar at the Institute and a fellow polio patient, found the site for the Little White House while exploring areas not accessible by car. Here Roosevelt rides at Warm Springs with fellow New York political leader Edward Flynn.¹⁴ Photo from Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

¹⁴Turnley Walker, *Roosevelt and the Warm Springs Story* (New York, 1953), 199. Decades later, the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute continues to help those suffering from spinal problems while the town has also become known for its therapeutic horseback riding. The Good Shepherd Riding Academy helps mentally and physically handicapped patients ride horses, strengthen muscles through physical activity, and gain confidence by mastering new activities.
In front of McCarthy Cottage at Warm Springs, Franklin Roosevelt joins Eleanor as she takes horseback riding lessons. Gus Gannerich, Roosevelt's long-time bodyguard, stands near Roosevelt in case he had any problems. Roosevelt maintained stables at Warm Springs. Area youth, such as Arthur Carpenter's sons and Bill Trotter, son of the manager of Callaway Mills in Manchester, could ride when they wanted.\footnote{Photo from the Little White House.}

Before he contracted polio, Roosevelt enjoyed golf and made sure that Warm Springs had a course. This photo may have been made in October 1931, when an exhibition tournament was held with a "Roosevelt Homecoming Barbecue." Roosevelt refereed a match between Charlie Yates, amateur champion of Atlanta and Georgia, and Russell Bridges versus Warren Mays, of Warm Springs and Charlie Haskins of Columbus.\footnote{Photograph from the Little White House.}

\footnote{Roosevelt's saddle at Warm Springs has been lent to the Little White House by Good Shepherd Riding Academy. The saddle had no modifications to make it easier for Roosevelt to get on a horse.}

\footnote{Interview with Bill Trotter, November 9, 1998.}
During visits to Georgia, one or another of Roosevelt’s children often accompanied him. Here Franklin enjoys a visit with daughter Anna Dall, son James and his wife, Elizabeth “Betsey” Cushing (on left) in a playful scene in 1930. Photograph from Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

Miss Tigner serves “possum and taters” to her father and FDR as a waiter moves in the background. When asked about Roosevelt, Tigner stated that: “I loved him... I remember when he shook my hand and looked at me and said ‘Hello Martha.’ I was sunk, melted away... We didn’t notice (his disability). We all knew he had polio but that was not the main thing. It was his personality that shone through.”17 Photo by T. W. O’Neal, Georgian American.

Roosevelt participated in a possum hunt from his car as neighbors and coon dogs gathered. Martha Tigner remembers the evening: "They were showing that Roosevelt was an active person. That was the thing to show that he could even go to a possum hunt . . . they were bringing up his name . . . and showing that he could get around and do whatever he wanted even though he was paralyzed."18 Photo above from Columbus Ledger-Enquirer; below from the Little White House.

18Ibid.
Roosevelt walks from his car near the Warm Springs Depot. Businessmen, young boys, and families gathered to see their famous neighbor. This is one of the few photos showing Roosevelt walking with his cane. Roosevelt walks with assistance from Gus Gennerich, his long-time bodyguard and friend. *Photo by Snelson Davis, courtesy of Troup County Archives.*

Farmers welcomed the Democratic presidential candidate to Warm Springs on October 25, 1932. They are left to right: Wes Anderson, C. M. Camp, and Otis Moore behind the president. Basil O’Connor sits in the back seat while A. L. Belle Isle, a member of the Atlanta reception committee, drives. This photograph appears to have been staged for the media; otherwise farmers would not have been out on a Sunday with pitch forks and hoes. *Photograph from the Little White House.*