

William Kissam Vanderbilt II (1878-1944)

Automobile Enthusiast, Yachtsman, and Collector



William K. Vanderbilt II, known to friends as “Willie K.,” was the great-grandson of the legendary railroad tycoon “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt and a long-time Huntington resident. His waterfront “Eagle’s Nest” summer estate in Centerport, which grew from a bungalow into a sprawling, Spanish Revival mansion with outbuildings and landscaped grounds, is now open to the public. His Long Island Motor Parkway, built originally between Great Neck and Lake Ronkonkoma as a private, limited access roadway, still survives in part as a legacy of the man and his passion for automobiles. An avid collector of natural history specimens, ethnographic objects and other curiosities of exotic cultures, Vanderbilt sailed his yachts the *Ara* and *Alva* around the globe on expeditions that yielded a vast array of treasures for his collection. Willie K. was born to wealth and privilege, but left an enduring legacy for all to enjoy in his Centerport estate, now the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum.

Willie K. was born in 1878 to William K. Vanderbilt, Sr. and Alva Murray Smith. He was educated at private schools and at Harvard and developed an interest in speed sports such as horse racing, motorboats and automobiles at an early age. He spent his childhood at the family’s Fifth Avenue mansion, at summer houses in Newport (“Marble House”) and Long Island (“Idle Hour”), and on his father’s yacht. He purchased his first automobile, a Morse, in 1899 and later became notorious for speeding through towns and villages on both sides of the Atlantic. He was also married in 1899 to Virginia Fair, with whom he had three children.

Between 1908 and 1911, Willie K. completed construction of the Motor Parkway that became the stage for his annual Vanderbilt Cup races. In 1910, he began work on the “Eagle’s Nest” estate. First conceived as a “modest” bungalow set on 43 wooded acres overlooking Northport Harbor, the property contrasted sharply in scale with “Deepdale,” his imposing Lake Success mansion built in 1902. The later house was no doubt prompted by his separation from Virginia in 1909. Between 1910 and 1935, Willie K. continued to expand his Centerport estate by remodeling the original bungalow and by adding wings and outbuildings.

His marriage to Rosamund Warburton in 1927 prompted significant changes to the estate that resulted in the elaborate, Spanish Revival style mansion that visitors see today. A Memorial Wing was constructed in 1935 in memory of his son, William K. Vanderbilt III, who had died in an auto accident in 1933. In the 1930s Willie K. opened the estate to the public several days a week. After his death in 1944, “Eagle’s Nest” was left in trust to Suffolk County to serve as a public museum. The museum opened in 1950 and continues to honor the bequest by exhibiting the diverse collections, estate furnishings and landscape features of its founder, William K. Vanderbilt II.



The bell tower at the entrance to the Vanderbilt Mansion at “Eagle’s Nest.”

For more information contact the
Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum
180 Little Neck Road, Centerport, NY 11721-0605
www.vanderbiltmuseum.org
(631) 854-5555; vanderbiltmuseum@hotmail.com