

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

MARBLE HOUSE

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Marble House

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 596 Bellevue Avenue

Not for publication:

City/Town: Newport

Vicinity:

State: RI County: Newport Code: 005

Zip Code: 02840

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Category of Property

Private: X

Building(s): X

Public-Local: \_\_\_

District: \_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_

Structure: \_\_\_

Object: \_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

Noncontributing

2

2 buildings

\_\_\_

\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_

1 structures

\_\_\_

\_\_\_ objects

2

3 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 2

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register
- Determined eligible for the National Register
- Determined not eligible for the National Register
- Removed from the National Register
- Other (explain):

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

---

**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Domestic Sub: Single Dwelling  
Current: Recreation and Culture Sub: Museum

**7. DESCRIPTION**

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Revivals: Beaux Arts

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Brick, Stone (marble)  
Walls: Brick, Stone (marble)  
Roof: Synthetics (rubber) and Metal (copper)  
Other:

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 4**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.****INTRODUCTION**

Marble House was designed and built between 1888 and 1892 under the direction of premiere American architect, Richard Morris Hunt for Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt. Marble House was inspired by the Petit Trianon (1760-1764), a garden retreat on the grounds of Versailles. The building is a white marble temple form with a two story entrance portico of Corinthian columns on its west façade facing the main entrance to the estate on Bellevue Avenue. The portico is accessed by a curved marble carriage ramp. The walls of the entire building are lined with two story Corinthian style pilasters and a large marble terrace is adjacent to the east façade which faces the grounds and views of the Atlantic Ocean. The house's French inspired interiors were designed by Jules Allard and Sons of Paris. The house has fifty rooms and, according to contemporary newspaper accounts, was built at the cost of \$11 million dollars, making Marble House the most costly of the Newport "cottages." The interior of Marble House contains approximately 500,000 square feet of marble. The marble work throughout was done by Batterson, See, and Eisele of New York. Marble House is set in a park of specimen beech trees. The estate is a long rectangular plot of land of 4.4 acres entered on the west by two gates opening onto Bellevue Avenue and terminated on the east by thirty foot cliffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. At the southeastern corner of the grounds, perched atop the cliffs, is the Chinese Teahouse, designed and built in 1913 by Joseph and Richard Howland Hunt.

**EXTERIOR**

Marble House is a U shaped building of load bearing brick faced in white marble from Tuckahoe, New York. The building is composed of four levels: a basement level containing kitchen and service areas, a ground level of reception rooms, a third level of family and guest bedrooms and a fourth level of servant quarters. The building appears as a two story structure, with the basement level concealed underground and the top level of servant quarters hidden behind a balustrade.

The façades of Marble House are an example of late nineteenth century Beaux Arts Classicism. As advocated by his training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, Richard Morris Hunt adapted the architectural forms of French Classicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the details of Marble House. All four façades are divided by two story Corinthian style pilasters framing arched windows or blind arches on the first floor and rectangular windows on the second floor. The west façade facing Bellevue Avenue is the main entrance to Marble House. The center of the façade is marked by a Corinthian style portico of four free standing columns facing a curved marble carriage ramp with cast iron lights. In front of the carriage ramp is a semi-circular fountain with three grotesque masks serving as water spouts. The front entrance grille of wrought iron is surmounted by a carved marble frieze depicting Neptune holding court at sea. The north and south facades are divided by two story Corinthian style pilasters. Between the pilasters on the first floor are arched windows and blind arches topped by classical female figures in carved marble. The east façade, facing the Atlantic Ocean, is composed of two side wings, each divided into two bays by Corinthian style pilasters. The center of the east façade is inset with four bays of first and second floor arched doors divided by two story Corinthian style pilasters. The second floor doors are topped by carved marble symbols of the zodiac. The entire east façade opens onto a marble terrace surrounded by a balustrade. All of the exterior stone in the building, for the wall surfaces, sculpture, terrace, carriage ramp and balustrades is of Tuckahoe marble from New York.

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 5**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**FIRST FLOOR****Entrance Grille**

The entrance, in the French baroque style, was made in New York at the John Williams Bronze Foundry. The two doors each weigh about a ton and a half and are set on pivots. The monogram "WV," surrounded by oval medallions, embellishes each door.

**Stair Hall**

The floor and the walls of the Stair Hall are covered with yellow marble from Siena, Italy.

The grand staircase railing is wrought iron and bronze with a gunmetal finish, decorated with gilt bronze trophies based on models formerly adorning a fountain at Versailles.

The hall rises to an eighteenth century Venetian ceiling painting which is surrounded by larger-than-life size mythological figures, two in each corner. They represent Apollo and Athena, Mars and Venus, Ceres (Earth Goddess) and Cronus (Father Time), and Poseidon and Thetis.

Opposite the foot of the staircase a bronze basin is flanked by two cherubs in front of a large mirror. Flowing water is represented using glass backed with silver-colored metallic leaf.

On either side of the basin there are two sets of double doors with French beveled glass. Both sets of doors open to the Grand Salon.

**The Grand Salon**

The Grand Salon, decorated in the Louis XIV style, served as a reception and ballroom. The green silk cut velvet upholstery and draperies bear the Louis XIV motif of Apollo in a sun burst. The original draperies and upholstery fabric were made by Prelle & Co. in Lyon, France. Reproduction fabric was re-woven using the original nineteenth century hand-loom weaving process, at Prelle & Co. In 2003 reproduction draperies were installed, and the room's original Louis XIV style suite of furniture was re-upholstered.

The ceiling painting is attributed as eighteenth century French, modeled after the work of the Italian artist Pietro da Cortona. The painting depicts Minerva (the Goddess of Wisdom and War) snatching a youth from his love. The painting is framed by a surround adapted from the ceiling of the Queen's Bedroom at Versailles. The room's two chandeliers were based on originals at the Château Maisons-Lafitte near Paris. They were originally piped for gas as well as wired for electricity. They are suspended from decorative masks representing Apollo.

The fireplace is carved from Fleur-de-Peche marble from France. In the center of the mantel is a mask of Bacchus, the God of Wine. The clock above is in the shape of a globe. The outer globe represents the earth. This revolved around a sphere representing the universe. The clock displays the month, day, and time in several cities simultaneously. Immense bronze figures perched on the corners of the mantel depict Youth and Old Age. These were jointly inspired by Michelangelo's allegorical figures of *Night* and *Day* in the Medici Chapel in Florence, as well as sculptures in the Salon of War at Versailles.

The room's walls are dominated by four large-scale carved wood and 22 karat gold gilt panels representing

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 6**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

scenes from classical mythology. The panels were made by Allard and Sons. Each is framed by a border of the Vanderbilt family emblems of acorns and oak leaves (symbolizing strength and longevity). The panels and the trophies above were inspired by panels in the Gallery of Apollo at the Louvre. The panel to the left of the fireplace depicts Poseidon (God of the Sea) with Thetis. To the right is Hercules aiming an arrow at Nessus (a Centaur seizing Hercules' wife Deianira). Left of the center window is Demeter (Goddess of the Harvest) with Pan (God of Shepherds and Flocks). Right of the window there is a carving of Aphrodite (Goddess of Beauty) seen rising from the sea.

**The Gothic Room**

The Gothic Room was designed primarily as a suitable setting for the display of Mrs. Vanderbilt's significant collection of Medieval and Renaissance decorative objects. She had acquired the collection from Parisian collector Emile Gavet in 1889.

The stone fireplace was copied by Allard and Sons from a chimney breast in the house of the merchant Jacques Coeur (1445) in Bourges, France. Coeur's house is one of the most significant extant examples of Gothic domestic architecture.

The Gothic Revival furnishings were provided by French cabinetmakers Gilbert Cuel. The twin stained glass windows at the far side of the room were originally a montage of antique and modern glass. The roundels were thirteenth century German, depicting scenes from the life and martyrdom of St. Lawrence. The side panels which flanked the roundels were nineteenth century copies of thirteenth century windows. To the right (south) side the windows, which dated from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, illustrated the Doctors of the Church and Franciscan notables.

Mrs. Vanderbilt's collection of Medieval and Renaissance decorative objects was sold in 1928. Subsequent owner of Marble House, Mr. Fredrick Prince, opted to remove some of its Gothic elements. The aforementioned windows were dismantled and dispersed in the 1940s. Renaissance inspired silk wall coverings were removed and applied gilt ceiling decoration was painted over.

In 1992, in honor of Marble House's centennial anniversary, The Preservation Society of Newport County began several campaigns of restoration to bring the room back to its 1892 appearance. Reproduction painted glass windows were made by the Parisian firm Duchemin. The silk damask wall coverings were rewoven based on a swatch of the original, by Scalamandre, in New York. Blue-green ceiling canvas featuring gilt scrolling vine and leaf patterning were recreated and installed by The Preservation Society's Conservation Department.

**The Library**

The Library served Mrs. Vanderbilt as both library and morning room. It is Louis XV (Rococo) in style. The frescoed ceiling depicts achievements made in the arts and sciences represented in allegorical female form. Specifically the ceiling depicts the Muses who inspired the arts: Clio, the Muse of History (east wall) and Terpsichore, Muse of Music (west wall). The four oval panels in each corner of the ceiling represent chemistry, botany, mechanical drawing, and astronomy.

The carved walnut bookcases and doors were a joint design effort by Jules Allard and Sons, and French cabinetmaker Gilbert Cuel.

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 7**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**The Dining Room**

The Dining Room walls are made of pink Numidian marble from Algeria in North Africa. The walls are decorated with pilasters with gilt bronze capitals and trophy motifs.

The ceiling bears symbols of hunting and fishing. A stag's head is depicted in each corner and a boar's head above the fireplace and at the opposite side of the room. Further ornament includes garlands of sea shells in yellow gold, and the side panels of the ceiling are filled with nets, oars, and fishing gear. The central ceiling painting is eighteenth century French. The ceiling is plaster, parts of which have been painted to resemble marble.

The fireplace mantel is a close replica of the one in the Salon of Hercules at Versailles with a gilt bronze mask of Hercules wearing the skin of a slain Nemean lion. The room contains original draperies of a gold threaded and red silk cut velvet, ensuite with upholstered Louis the XIV gilt bronze furnishing.

**THE MEZZANINE**

Mr. Vanderbilt's study is on the north side, its walls lined with red silk damask. Mrs. Vanderbilt's study is on the south side of the mezzanine; it is decorated with Louis XV style paneling.

Above the mezzanine (on the east wall) there are two white marble, sculpted, portrait medallions by artist Karl Bitter (1867-1915); on the left is Marble House architect, Richard Morris Hunt, and on the right is Jules (Hardouin) Mansard, one of the primary architects of Louis XIV's Versailles.

**THE SECOND FLOOR****Mr. Vanderbilt's Bedroom**

At the head of the staircase is Mr. Vanderbilt's bedroom. The green-gold silk wall covering is in the neo-classical taste and is original to the room.

**Mrs. Vanderbilt's Bedroom**

Mrs. Vanderbilt's bedroom is decorated in the Louis XIV style. It is embellished with garlands, nymphs, and cherubs. The walls are covered with a reproduction silk fabric, made as the originals were, in France by Prelle & Co., using the original loom cards.

The circular ceiling painting (c. 1721) depicts the Goddess Athena. It was painted by the eighteenth century Venetian artist Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini and was originally in the library of the Pisani Palace in Venice.

**The Harold Stirling Vanderbilt Memorial Room**

This room was formed by dismantling adjoined dressing rooms once used by Mrs. Vanderbilt and her daughter Consuelo. The new single room was then decorated in the Federal Revival style and was the master bedroom of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Prince, who owned Marble House from 1932 to 1963. In 1980, this room was dedicated to Harold S. Vanderbilt (Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt's youngest child), who generously provided funds for the Preservation Society to acquire Marble House from the Prince estate in 1963. The room

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 8**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

now houses display cases, which showcase Harold S. Vanderbilt's yachting trophies and memorabilia.

**Consuelo Vanderbilt's Bedroom**

Consuelo was the eldest of the Vanderbilt's three children. Her siblings were William K. Vanderbilt, Jr. and Harold Stirling Vanderbilt. Consuelo's bedroom is done in the French Renaissance style with original furnishing by Gilbert Cuel.

The walls have been covered in rep (a ribbed fabric), by the Preservation Society. The delicate gold embroidery at the cornice is in part the original by Cuel, supplemented where damaged with reproductions. Reproductions were skillfully rendered by members of Rhode Island's Hmong community, who were refugees from Laos, where they learned the meticulous art of embroidery.

**Guest Suite**

In the opposite (north) wing of the second floor is the guest suite comprised of a bedroom and adjacent sitting room.

The suite is done in the Louis XV revival style, which was popular during the 1890s. The guest suite fabrics were replaced in 1987. The bedroom room walls are covered in reproduction silk lampas manufactured by Prella & Co., Prella also made the silk taffeta draperies. Scalamandre of New York reproduced silk wall coverings for the adjoined sitting room.

**The Elevator**

In the 1930s the Princes had the elevator installed. It had been in a New York hotel.

**The Boys' Bedrooms**

The remaining two rooms on the second floor are the restored bedrooms once occupied by brothers, William K. (Jr.) and Harold S. Vanderbilt.

The wooden servants' stairway leads to the basement. A steel grille encloses the stairway at basement level. This provided security by denying access to the rest of the house during deliveries of ice, wine, groceries, and flowers.

**THE BASEMENT**

**The Butler's Office** has its original oak woodwork and cream painted plaster walls.

**The Scullery**

This area has the original icebox with brass hardware, soapstone sink, "Pittsburg' Automatic Instantaneous Water Heater," and the built in cabinets house original family dinnerware.

**The Kitchen**

The French style stove was made in New York. There are four ovens and a broiler. The top cooking surface measures 14x3 feet.

The icebox was made in Boston by Eddy and Co. It has a side drain instead of a drip pan. The attached sink was used for chipping and cracking ice.

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 9**National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

---

**THE CHINESE TEA HOUSE**

The Chinese Tea House, located in the southeast corner of the grounds of Marble House, was designed in 1913 by Joseph and Richard Howland Hunt. The architects modeled the teahouse after twelfth century Sung dynasty temples in southern China. The building is composed of wooden columns, painted red, supporting a roof of terra cotta tiles that are glazed in pale green. The roof is decorated with Chinese style dragons. The spaces between the columns are filled with wooden panels pierced by octagonal windows.

The teahouse is surrounded by a wooden terrace with a balustrade. The entrance to the terrace is marked by an ornamental gate modeled after Chinese temple gates.

The interior of the teahouse is one rectangular space. The walls are covered in wood panels painted with Chinese scenes. Calligraphy appears on the columns framing the wood panels.

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 10**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide:    Locally:   

Applicable National

Register Criteria: A    B X C X D

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions): A    B    C    D    E    F    G

NHL Criteria:

2 and 4

NHL Theme(s):

III. Expressing Cultural Values  
5. architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design

Areas of Significance:

Architecture, Social History

Period(s) of Significance:

1888-1932

Significant Dates:

1888–1892, 1913

Significant Person(s):

Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt (Mrs. Alva Belmont)

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

Richard Morris Hunt (house)  
J. Allard and Sons (interiors)  
Gilbert Cuel (interiors)  
Richard and Joseph Howland Hunt (Chinese Tea House)

Historic Contexts:

XVI. Architecture  
M. Period Revivals (1870-1940)  
5. Neo-Classical (1890-1915)  
XXX. American Ways of Life  
F. Industrial Wealth of the Last Half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 11**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

Standing on Bellevue Avenue like a Greek temple, Marble House exemplifies all that is significant and worthy of the American Renaissance of the late nineteenth century. It is the result of a creative collaboration between Richard Morris Hunt and his patron Alva Vanderbilt. Together they designed Marble House as a temple to the arts for the Vanderbilt family's private use knowing full well of its public interest and the power they had to influence America's developing aesthetic tastes. Their collaboration on Marble House is reminiscent of the patron/artist tradition under King Louis XIV of France. The Marble House is a virtual showcase of various French styles, a product of Hunt's training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and Alva's youth spent in Paris. Both had an appreciation for French culture and design. Together, with seemingly endless financial resources, they built a structure unparalleled in design and opulence in its day. Today, Marble House is a testament to the architectural genius of Richard Morris Hunt and the spirit of the times that would later be termed America's "Gilded Age." As owners of the New York Central System, the Vanderbilts were one of the wealthiest families in America. Their railroad system linked New York to Chicago in the period following the Civil War when the northeast region was emerging as the industrial heartland of the nation. The economic influence of the Vanderbilts and their financial and cultural power in America were expressed in the family houses and their patronage of American architecture. Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt understood the importance of architecture and is largely responsible for the Vanderbilt program of building grand houses in New York, on Fifth Avenue, and in Newport, on Bellevue Avenue. Marble House, in Newport, RI, was one of the earliest of the Beaux Arts houses to appear in America, and it would influence the design of architecture thereafter.

Richard Morris Hunt spent a great deal of time traveling abroad as a child and young adult. While sketching his foreign surroundings, Hunt showed proficiency for design. It was his years at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, however, that most influenced and poised him to emerge as one of the leading architects of the American Renaissance.

Hunt's ten year immersion in strict academic classicism and the ever-present architectural heritage of France wrought a reverence for antiquity and a master of Beaux-Arts planning and design techniques. In America, an emerging nationalism and pursuit of American symbols, characterizing the so called "American Renaissance" of the 1880s and 90s, saw Beaux-Arts classicism in the ascendant.<sup>1</sup>

In an effort to centralize the control of new art and architecture, King Louis XIV founded the Academie Royal d'Architecture in 1671.<sup>2</sup> At this time many academics considered the Italian Renaissance style the highest form of architectural achievement, and therefore it was the only style taught to the students. Training for students included public lectures on architectural theory and, for a limited number of students, drawing and design were taught in the *atelier* (studio) of a *patron* (master architect). This form of teaching did not change for over two hundred years even when the Academie became the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was still based on the study of classical architecture. The foundations of the Ecole were rooted in the design of royal architecture, and this in addition to the consistent use of the Italian Renaissance as the favorable model, meant the compositions at the Ecole were consistently monumental and formal.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kelly Carlson-Reddig, "The Ecole des Beaux Arts and Eclecticism: Manifestations in Richard Morris Hunt's Marble House," (Preservation Society of Newport County Archives, 1991), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

**MARBLE HOUSE****Page 12**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Under the patronage of Hector Martin Lefuel, Hunt studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from 1846 to 1855. While pursuing academic studies at the Ecole, Hunt took many excursions and continued to sketch his environs, thus broadening his knowledge of historic French architecture. As the first American to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Richard Morris Hunt was well positioned to bring European architectural styles to the United States. Upon returning to the United States in 1855, one of Hunt's first contributions to the teaching of the Beaux-Arts in America was to design and build the 10th Street Studio in New York City. It was here that he began his important role as a lifelong patron to many noteworthy young aspirants.

Hunt's early career was marred by his struggle to design in the High Victorian Gothic style that was emerging as the predominant style in New York. For example, Hunt's Presbyterian Hospital and the Yale Divinity School commissions met with little critical acclaim. After the Civil War, Hunt started to receive more commissions, mostly in New York City. He designed numerous commercial buildings including the Tribune Building and the Royal Phelps Building. In 1869, Hunt also received a commission to design the Stuyvesant Apartments, one of the first "French flat" style apartment buildings of its kind in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Yet it was not until the 1870s with his design for the Lenox Library that Hunt finally reconciled his Ecole education with American tastes.

Hunt's commission for the Lenox Library on the Upper East Side of Manhattan was a turning point in his career in many ways. For instance, it was a great example of the kind of monumental French classicism taught at the Ecole. It has been compared to the Musée-Bibliothèque in Grenoble, France, a building that Hunt would have been familiar with by 1870. In addition, it was also the first of many commissions for some of the richest and most powerful families in the country.

Mr. and Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt became important patrons of Richard Morris Hunt. William K. Vanderbilt was the grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt I, the shipping and railroad magnate known as "The Commodore." Described as good-natured and polite, William K. was less inclined towards the family business than his older brother, Cornelius II (owner of The Breakers also in Newport, NHL, 1994). Nevertheless, by the time he was 19 years old, William K. was already working in the Treasurer's Office of the New York Central Railroad. By the time he was 28, William K. was made second vice president of the company. Upon the death of his brother Cornelius in 1899, William K. became President and Chairman of the New York Central Railroad. By 1903, William K. grew tired of the pressures of running a multi-million dollar company and decided to transfer his holdings in New York Central to the Rockefeller-Morgan-Pennsylvania Railroad. He retired to Paris where he lived until his death in 1920.

Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt, née Alva Erskine Smith, was from a prominent mercantile Southern family. Her family was part of the Southern social elite, though they were never fully accepted in the inner circle. Their inability to penetrate the ranks of the South's aristocracy might explain her determination in later years to ensure her children's place in the upper echelons of society. Like many Southern families, the Smiths moved to Paris during the height of the Civil War. It was in Paris that Alva's fondness for art and architecture blossomed. Reflecting back on her time in Paris, Alva wrote, "In France the love of Art was implanted in me. I would live in museums and sit for hours on the benches in the parks sketching the buildings."<sup>4</sup> After the Civil War, upon her return to America, she wrote, "I was broken hearted that I must leave France...Child that I was, America struck me in contrast to France as crude and raw."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Paul R. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 204.

<sup>4</sup> Alva Vanderbilt Belmont, *Autobiography*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 13**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

A young Alva Smith met William K. Vanderbilt in 1875 while vacationing at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.<sup>6</sup> Both shared many interests including their love for Europe and the arts. Their marriage did not last. Shortly after Marble House was completed, the two separated in a highly publicized divorce in 1895. Alva then married Mr. Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont in 1896, who owned another Newport mansion, Belcourt.

Biographers and observers of Mrs. Belmont's life describe her as short tempered and sharp tongued, portraying her as a woman with ruthless determination and drive to increase her social standing and prestige. Mrs. Vanderbilt was aware of the power of architecture and the patronage of the arts in the creation of a family's dynastic image. In fact, in her autobiography, Mrs. Belmont would liken herself to the Medici family of Italy.

From my first visit to Italy, I developed a deep admiration of the Dei Medici family in relation to their use of private fortunes for public welfare. They were [of] humble origin [but] when the enormous fortune had been gathered from among the people, the Medici family spent a great portion for the people and their patronage of Arts and Letters; their beautification of their Florentine city was an example I had long desired to emulate. After my Marriage it seemed to me that the Vanderbilt family had much the same opportunity that had come to the Dei Medicis. They, too, were of humble origin. Their wealth had been made among the people. Now that it was made, what form was their public return to take? What could they give back in the form of Art and Beauty generally? These were the thoughts that reached a conclusion in my determination to break away from the ugly architecture prevalent in New York and build a house which would not only be a thing of beauty for our private enjoyment but an ornament to the city.<sup>7</sup>

The "ornament to the city" that she was referring to was her home at 660 Fifth Avenue (1879–1883), which was Richard Morris Hunt's first encounter with the demanding Alva. For all of her input in designing her residences, Alva remained one of Hunt's greatest patrons. She and Hunt seemed to have a very close and mutually respectful working relationship. According to the memoirs of Hunt's widow, Catherine, Hunt held Alva Vanderbilt in the highest regard when it came to her knowledge and taste in architecture, "for Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt's intellect and broad grasp of architecture, he had the greatest admiration, and often he said: 'She's a wonder!'"<sup>8</sup>

When Hunt was commissioned to design Marble House, Mrs. Vanderbilt already knew what she wanted. Hunt was hired to bring her ideas to fruition. She wrote, "...the gem of the Marble House idea was born at the foot of the Acropolis. I doubt not this place has been a manger cradle for many a divine idea which later grew into immortal beauty."<sup>9</sup> Hunt immediately enlisted the help of numerous European artists and designers including Jules Allard and Sons and the Paris firm of Henri Dasson. Marble House was immediately recognized as a classical masterpiece and one that set the standard for similar efforts during the American Renaissance. While Marble House is a testament to classical design, it was compared to other great examples such as Petit Trianon at Versailles, and the White House. Marble House symbolizes the beginning of the classical and historicist spirit that inspired the American Renaissance and the application of classical models in domestic architecture.

Mrs. Vanderbilt referred to her work with Hunt on Marble House as a "triumph of our combined thought and of his workmanship."<sup>10</sup> In later years she would open Marble House to art students, allowing them access to draw

<sup>6</sup> Ann Benway, *Marble House Draft* (Preservation Society of Newport County Archives, 1991), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Belmont, *Autobiography*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Ossman, *Marble House Project* (Preservation Society of Newport County Archives, 1991), 26.

<sup>9</sup> Belmont, *Autobiography*, 75.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 14**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

the house and its rich architectural details and examples of classical ornament. Mrs. Vanderbilt fulfilled her dream of building a classical-style monument. Alva also knew how to use her house as a backdrop for lavish parties and events, and spared no expense when it came to her private agenda. It was at Marble House that Mrs. Vanderbilt hosted her daughter Consuelo's coming-out ball.

It was no secret that Mrs. Vanderbilt had plans for her daughter to marry the ninth Duke of Marlborough when she invited him to spend the summer at Marble House. On August 28, 1895, Mrs. Vanderbilt threw what the *New York Herald* would call "Newport's grandest ball...a function of magnificent and expensive details."<sup>11</sup> Ostensibly for Consuelo's debut, but mostly for the Duke, the party outdid "any private social function ever given in this country." More than 500 guests attended. Footmen dressed in Louis XIV fashion led them into the main hall, which was dominated by a spectacular floral piece, consisting of a large bronze fountain filled with floating lotus, water hyacinths, and fairy lamps. Fluttering about the flowers were hummingbirds and butterflies. Guests danced to three orchestras in the Gold Room, while nine French chefs prepared dinner. In November of 1895, Consuelo Vanderbilt married the ninth Duke of Marlborough in one of the most celebrated weddings of the Gilded Age.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Alva, now remarried as Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont, had immersed herself in the women's suffrage movement. For a fundraiser in 1909, she opened the Marble House for the first time to the public in order that she might raise awareness for the movement.<sup>12</sup> One dollar was charged for a ticket to the grounds and five dollars for a ticket to see the house's interior. About 500 people were present to hear speeches given on Marble House's back lawn by such noted suffragettes as Julia Howe and Anna Howard Shaw. Mrs. Belmont's dedication to the suffrage movement was nationally recognized. She was the founder and president of the Political Equality Association and opened the first settlement house of suffragists in New York City. She was an active supporter of women workers and labor reform.<sup>13</sup>

During the summer of 1912, Mrs. Belmont, with the help of Inez Milholland, opened the Newport County Women's Suffrage League and in the summer of 1914 she held another rally on the Marble House lawn.<sup>14</sup> This time the conference featured her daughter, Consuelo, delivering a speech on the Homes for Prisoners' Wives and Children, an organization she helped found in England. This same summer the Chinese Tea House (1912-1913) made its debut. It was built by Joseph and Richard Howland Hunt, the sons of Richard Morris Hunt. Mrs. Belmont hosted a lavish ball in honor of its completion. Nearly every guest was clad in oriental costume with Alva dressed as a Chinese empress.

Not long after opening the Tea House, Mrs. Belmont moved to France where she endeavored to restore an old chateau near Fountainbleau. The Gilded Age was ending, and though Alva continued to use her position to advance the suffrage movement and other causes, Marble House and Newport did not have the prestige they once had. Shortly before her death in 1933, Mrs. Belmont sold Marble House to Frederick H. Prince of Boston, a yachtsman and president of Armour and Co. Mrs. Belmont is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in New York in a Gothic Revival style mausoleum of her own design.

Marble House is a temple on a landscape atop the cliff of Newport overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Inspired by the Parthenon and the Petit Trianon, two icons of classical architecture, Marble House is a celebration of the

---

<sup>11</sup> *New York Herald*, August 29, 1895.

<sup>12</sup> Benway, *Marble House Draft*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> The Sewall-Belmont House in Washington, DC (NHL, 1974), the headquarters for the National Women's Party since 1929, honors Alva Belmont in the second half of its name because of her staunch moral and monetary support for women's suffrage.

<sup>14</sup> Benway, *Marble House Draft*, 34-35.

**MARBLE HOUSE****Page 15**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

---

artistic, cultural and social power of buildings. The patron, Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt, and architect Richard Morris Hunt, used the Parthenon and the Petit Trianon to make a statement about powerful women and their place in national life. The Parthenon is the temple to Athena, goddess of wisdom and war. The Petit Trianon was a garden retreat for Madame de Pompadour and Marie Antoinette, two of the most powerful figures in eighteenth century European culture. Marble House expressed Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt's emerging role in American social and cultural life. Mrs. Vanderbilt then used the fame of her opulent Marble House to increase women's influence beyond society and culture to embrace political power through the women's suffrage movement. The architecture of Marble House was the classical canon of design to serve as a meaningful symbol of America's social, cultural and political aspirations during the Gilded Age.

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 16**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Baker, Paul R. *Richard Morris Hunt*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986.

Balsan, Consuelo Vanderbilt. *The Glitter and the Gold*. Kent, England: George Mann Books, 1973.

Belmont, Mrs. O. H. P. "Autobiography." San Marino, CA: Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1917.

Benway, Ann. "Marble House Draft." Preservation Society of Newport County Archives, 1991.

Carlson-Reddig, Kelly. "The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and Eclecticism: Manifestation in Richard Morris Hunt's Marble House." Preservation Society of Newport County Archives, 1991.

Cheek, Richard. *Newport Mansions: The Gilded Age*. Little Compton, RI: Fort Church Publishers, Inc., 1996.

Ossman, Laurie. "The Marble House Project." Preservation Society of Newport County Archives, 1991.

Preservation Society of Newport County Archives. Marble House Tour Outline. Revised, February 1999.

Stein, Susan R., ed. *The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

Previously Listed in the National Register.

Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.

Designated a National Historic Landmark.

Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #

Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State Agency

Federal Agency

Local Government

University

Other (Specify Repository): American Institute of Architects, Hunt Collection, The Octagon, Washington, DC; The Preservation Society of Newport County, Library and Archives

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 17**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: 4.4 acres

UTM References:	<b>Zone</b>	<b>Easting</b>	<b>Northing</b>
	19	307420	4591970

## Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundary of the property is defined in the Trustee's Deed dated December 12, 1963, Land Evidence Book 210, and pp. 161-162, held by the City Clerk's Office of Newport County, Rhode Island. The property is located in Plat No. 37, Lot 18, defined as follows:

NORTHERLY: by land now or formerly of James Cameron Clark, et ux, for a distance of six hundred twenty-seven (627) feet;

EASTERLY: by the Atlantic Ocean;

SOUTHERLY: partly by land now or formerly of Wiley T. Buchanan, et ux, and partly by land now or formerly of Chartier Real Estate Co., Inc., for a distance of seven hundred ninety-three (793) feet; and

WESTERLY: by Bellevue Avenue, for a distance of three hundred twenty (320) feet.

## Boundary Justification:

The boundary includes the house, "Chinese Teahouse" and surrounding grounds which have historically been part of the Marble House estate and which retain historic integrity.

**MARBLE HOUSE**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

**Page 18**

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Mr. John R. Tschirch, Architectural Historian

Address: The Preservation Society of Newport County  
424 Bellevue Avenue  
Newport, RI 02840

Telephone: 401-847-1000

Date: April 25, 2005

Edited by: Beth L. Savage  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places  
1849 C St., N.W. (2280)  
Washington, DC 20240Patty Henry  
National Park Service  
National Historic Landmarks Program  
1849 C Street, N.W. (2280)  
Washington, DC 20240

Telephone: (202) 354-2220

(202) 354-2216

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK  
February 17, 2006