

TR's presidential library is coming to North Dakota

The 26th president spent three life-changing years in the Dakota Badlands.

By JENNIFER SCHUESSLER
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MEDORA, N.D. — In Medora, a tiny town in the Badlands of western North Dakota, Teddy Roosevelt is everywhere.

The cabin from his Maltese Cross Ranch sits at the gateway of the 70,447-acre Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Downtown, you'll find the historic Rough Riders Hotel and, in front of the Old Town Hall Theater, a bronze statue of the man himself.

And in 2½ years, visitors will also find something else: a presidential library.

The Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library, set to open July 4, 2026, will pay tribute to the 26th president's "relentless, resilient spirit" and environmental vision. Perched dramatically on a butte, it aims to be "a people's presidential library," rooted not in books and archives — there are none — but immersive exhibits that challenge visitors to get, as Roosevelt famously put it, "in the arena."

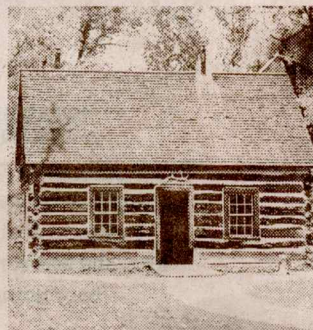
The \$333 million project under construction has largely been flying below the radar outside the state. It was here that Roosevelt came in 1883 to hunt buffalo. And it was here where he returned a year later to recover from a devastating depression brought on by the death, on the same day, of his wife and mother.

Roosevelt, who stayed nearly three years, found renewal and purpose in the area's stark beauty. "I never would have been President if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota," he later wrote. It was here "that the romance of my life began."



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A Theodore Roosevelt statue in Medora, N.D., where he came in 1883 to hunt buffalo and returned a year later to recover from a deep depression after his wife and mother died on the same day.



Roosevelt's Badlands cabin.

More than a century after his death, Roosevelt remains one of the most popular presidents, celebrated as a man of action, a muscular nationalist, an environmental visionary, a trustbuster or all of the above.

But Roosevelt also saw life as a struggle between the weak and the strong, with whites at the top of the evolutionary heap. Which raises another, thornier question: How do you build an honest 21st-century museum about a figure whose 19th-century attitudes about race, empire and, especially, Native Americans still trail him like a cloud of dust?

First major speech

"I like big things," Roosevelt declared in 1886, in his first major public speech, delivered in Dickinson, 37 miles east of Medora. "Big parades, big forests and mountains, big wheat fields, railroads — and herds of cattle, too."

And the library is definitely ambitious. Its 93,000-square-foot interior will include "narrative galleries" telling Roosevelt's life story, flanked by immersive "experience galleries," where visitors can test their mettle, for example, by charging up an ersatz Kettle Hill, where Roosevelt's Rough Riders triumphed in the Spanish-American War.

There will also be community spaces, a cafe and an auditorium that meets the requirements for hosting presidential debates.

But from the outside, the building, designed by Norwegian firm Snohetta, will disappear into the landscape, half embedded in the earth. Visitors can walk across the arching green roof or drink in the

vastness of the surrounding Badlands via a looping 1-mile boardwalk.

Planners say it will be among the most sustainable cultural institutions in the world, meeting the goals of "zero energy, zero water, zero emissions and zero waste." It will also be the only presidential library visitors can reach on horseback or mountain bike, via the 150-mile Maah Daah Hey Trail.

"The library is the landscape," Edward F. O'Keefe, the project's chief executive, said on a recent visit. It's a mantra cited often, along with the library's core values: "dare greatly, think boldly, care deeply and live passionately."

"When we began to think about this project, and honoring the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt," O'Keefe said, "it began with the land."

O'Keefe led a group to a spectacular lookout, pointing out the spot in the valley where Roosevelt first disembarked by train. The future president's initial impression wasn't great. The scenery was barren, he complained in a letter, while the weather left him in "shivering misery."

'Teddy Triangle'

North Dakota's presidential library push began 10 years ago, with a plan to build it at Dickinson State University. It was to be coordinated by the school's Theodore Roosevelt Center, which was also creating a digital library, including scans of all known Roosevelt-related items.

In 2018, after funding cuts at the university, the project shifted to Medora, with a push from Gov. Doug Burgum.

In 2019, Burgum signed legislation committing \$50 million from the state's oil and gas revenue fund, provided library backers could raise \$100 million by the end of 2020.

In October 2020, the library announced it had reached that

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benchmark. The \$81,000 purchase of the Forest Service land, completed in 2022, was paid for by a group of Roosevelt descendants, three of whom are on the library's board.

Supporters hope the library will cement Medora, which already draws an estimated 250,000 tourists a year, as part of a "Teddy Triangle," along with Mount Rushmore (about four hours to the south) and Yellowstone National Park (seven hours to the southwest).

The park will also receive "the statue," a 10-foot bronze of Roosevelt on horseback, towering over a shirtless African man and Native American man walking on either side, which stood for decades in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where its symbolism of white superiority had long attracted criticism.

The city approved its removal in June 2021. That November, the library announced that it would receive the statue on long-term loan, for "recontextualization." The surprise news set off an outcry among Native Americans, who make up about 5% of North Dakota's population. Mark N. Fox, chair of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara (or MHA) Nation, called the relocation "ignorant and inappropriate."

When the library opens in 2026, Native American history and perspectives will be integrated into the exhibits. The library is also discussing ways to direct visitors to Native-run sites, including the MHA Nation's new \$30 million interpretive center in New Town.

The statue will not be on display when the library opens, O'Keefe said, and plans beyond that are uncertain. So why did the library take it in the first place? He acknowledged that the statue is "radioactive" but said that the library had an obligation to confront "hard things," adding "if we're committed to the idea of 'humanize, don't lionize,' how could we shirk this difficult discussion?" O'Keefe said. "It didn't feel resonant with Theodore Roosevelt."