

A Fifth Day of Freedom - the Beloved Island at the end of the world

Those readers who remember a column I wrote in 2024 titled Four Days of Freedoms and are interested in the life, times and legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt, here is another travel tip: Campobello Island, in New Brunswick, Canada. A bit off the beaten track, or some might say, at the end of the world.

Having visited six Roosevelt sites in the Tri-State Area, and reading up more about where Theodore, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt spent their time, Campobello Island had made my list of places next to visit quite some time ago.

In September 2025, when I travelled to Ithaca, New York, researching Hendrik Willem van Loon's life and then to Boston for the wonderful fundraiser of the NAF New England Chapter in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, I had the audacious plan to make the trip to Campobello Island and back in two days. And I so nearly made it.

After a six-hour drive through beautiful New England and with only 10 miles to go to my destination, my rental car had a flat tire.... Now if there is one thing I cannot recommend, it is to have a flat tire on the edge of Maine. Unless you are the adventurous type, wanting to make new friends, like Bob of Lyons Towing Company in Calais, ME, who towed me all the way back to Bangor Airport to get a replacement vehicle. Alas, I made it to the hotel in North Lubec at 10pm instead of 2:30pm, with no time the following morning to make the visit across the FDR Memorial Bridge, opened in 1962, as I had a flight to catch back home later that day.

Before you ask, rental cars these days have no spare tires anymore. "They get stolen", I was told at Boston's Logan Airport when I was ready for my second attempt in June 2026.

A Bridge Revisited

For some reason, I had not been able to shake off the idea after having gotten so close, but not actually having made it to the island. I warned myself this time to lower my expectations, as this would take another awfully long detour on my way to a NAF event.

The NAF's Ambassadors Awards Dinner and the annual Members and Board meetings in Washington D.C. were the excuse for the road trip this time. The Dinner is always planned during the week; therefore, I had once again decided to take the whole week off work and fly to Boston on the Saturday morning before.

After a short visit to Plymouth, MA, where the Pilgrims landed in 1620, and a lovely dinner with Bharat Tewari, the NAF's leader in Boston, I set off due North early on Sunday morning.

On the way I briefly left the Interstate I-95 and stopped over at Kennebunkport. The Bush family still have their beautiful compound on Walker's Point. The Bushes of course also

have Dutch ancestry. This was commemorated when George H.W. Bush visited the Pieterskerk in Leiden in 1989. I remember because my brother was living in the Kloksteeg, right beside the Church, at the time. Already in those days the Secret Service closed down entire city centers when POTUS made an appearance.

My second stop was Bar Harbor, the gateway to Acadia National Park. Unfortunately, I did not have time for more than a brief visit to the main street of the picturesque coastal town to buy a raincoat. I had expected cooler weather up North, just as James and Sara Roosevelt did when they first travelled this far north to escape the sweltering heat of New York City and Hyde Park. But rain had not been in the forecast.

The final two hours on the US-1 gave me the same beautiful landscapes I had already admired (twice) nine months earlier. This time the landscape was donned in shades of early summer green, rather than full autumnal abundance of color.

I had booked a room at the same Inn-on-the-Wharf in Lubec, overlooking the Bay of Fundy, which separates the U.S. mainland from the Canadian Island of Campobello. This time I arrived in time for a freshly caught seafood dinner served at the hotel (they close at 8pm). The town proudly calls itself the easternmost town in the United States. If it were not for Campobello Island which is yet further east, you would truly feel at the end of the world.



Picture: sunset view over the Bay of Fundy from the balcony

Bridging Worlds

The next morning, I happily presented myself at the FDR Memorial Bridge into Canada. The NAF's motto has been "Bridging Worlds" since our centennial in 2021. This bridge was an especially telling one. Not only does it connect two countries which have been neighbors for the past 250 years, it bridges the world of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's lives before and after polio struck him. In a way, the bridge takes you ahead in time: Campobello Island is on Atlantic Time, where Maine is on Eastern time, so you go one hour ahead. But it also takes you back some 140 years. To the time when James and Sara Roosevelt first arrived on what they came to call their "beloved island" in search of an escape from the summer heat in New York.

Back in those days, there were two ways to get to the island. Either by train to Eastport, ME, which was a two-day journey from New York. From Eastport on Moose Island, which is connected to the mainland with a causeway, the Roosevelts would charter a local fisherman from Campobello Island to take them, their luggage and their staff of typically six across the Bay. First in 1881, to one of the luxurious local hotels that had been built to receive affluent families from Boston, New York, Ottawa and Montreal. Later, to the summer cottage which James had built on a piece of land he had bought in 1883 when Franklin was one year old. From 1908, the larger cottage next door which Sara bought for Franklin and Eleanor as a belated wedding gift became the summer home of the Roosevelts for many years.

The other way was to arrive by boat. When Franklin served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, he did have access to a few. And I imagine he would be thrilled that to this day, every fourth of July, a navy vessel docks at Eastport for locals to visit and celebrate American Independence Dayⁱ.

After the FDR Memorial Bridge was opened, access became a lot easier. Do bring your passport!

The island has retained its sense of remoteness. Your cell phone and satellite navigation may work, but you don't need them to find your way driving the 1.5 kilometers (the Canadians have adopted the metric system) at a maximum of 50 kilometers per hour to arrive at the visitor center of Roosevelt Campobello International Park.

In complete confirmation of the cultural stereotype, I was received most friendly by the staff at reception. So much so that I almost did not notice the 14-foot canoe hanging high over the reception desk. The birch bark canoe was hand-built by Tomah Joseph, a Passamaquoddy elder who mentored young Franklin teaching him how to navigate the currents and winds of the waters around the island.

The staff at reception suggested I'd see the 10-minute video first, and then make my way to the Wells-Shober Cottage for Eleanor's Tea. This free gathering is held daily during the

season at 11am and 3pm (Atlantic Time!). And I am glad I did. In almost hour-long chat whilst guests were sipping tea and sampling locally baked sugar snaps, two experts highlighted Eleanor's life and the mark she made on the world both on and off the island.

If you want to read the description of the island in her own words, she wrote a wonderful column in the My Day series, published on August 10, 1962, the week before the FDR Memorial Bridge was openedⁱⁱ.

After the chat, I asked them the same question which I had asked Dr. Anya Luscombe, the director of the Zeeland Archives in Middelburg and Eleanor Roosevelt expert, at the Roosevelt Lecture on April 10, as well as to Bill Harris, director of the FDR Library and Museum in Hyde Park, New York, at the Hendrik Willem van Loon Lecture in Rotterdam on April 16: would there have been an FDR as we know him without Eleanor?

The question yielded a range of answers. After FDR contracted what current experts suspected was the Guillain-Barré syndrome, which was then diagnosed as infantile paralysis, or polio, he and his mother thought his political career was over.

Eleanor though was one of the ones convincing him that it was not. Despite his earlier infidelity with Lucy Mercer, Eleanor's secretary, she stood by him, and quite literally became his eyes and legs.

She kept the Roosevelt name alive among the public, enabling him to resume his political career, becoming the governor of the State of New York and ultimately President of the United States. By nature, she was a shy person. Going out into the public made Eleanor find her own voice. She did not just travel the length and breadth of the country propagating Franklin's views to voters. Time and again, she brought to him her own views on social justice, equality, inclusion of disenfranchised groups such as women, Americans of color or Americans with recent immigrant backgrounds from Ireland, Italy and Eastern Europe. She pushed his conscience, sometimes well beyond what he considered politically expedient.

FDR is widely regarded as having had an extraordinary talent to not only read the public opinion, but to drive the public views in a direction that was not always obvious and expedient.

In my opinion, Eleanor, together with Lorena "Hick" Hickockⁱⁱⁱ, a reporter, provided Franklin the lens into parts of American society that enabled him to develop and use this extraordinary talent. Eleanor's activist approach helped him stick by crucial policy initiatives, during the introduction and development of the New Deal in the 1930's, ensuring that Americans of all backgrounds were included in the struggle to overcome the Great Depression.

Eleanor strongly advocated and personified America's responsibilities on a global scale. During WW-II, she visited numerous domestic military camps, such as the Tuskegee

Airmen, a group of primarily African American military pilots in 1941 and travelled to active war zones. She made a 25,000 miles tour of the Pacific as a Red Cross delegate speaking directly to an estimated 400,000 troops, including many wounded.

Finally, after FDR passed away in 1945, she galvanized the joint legacy of the three Roosevelts through her work in the United Nations. Undoubtedly, FDR would be remembered as one of the greatest presidents of the United States and world leaders in history, even if Eleanor had decided to retire to her up-state New York cottage Val Kil or her apartment in New York City in April 1945 and lead a quiet life. However, she did not. Rather she was a key architect of the foundations of the post-war peace that has lasted over eighty years.

That Eleanor, in a way, acted as Franklin's conscience became abundantly clear during the chat at Eleanor's Tea, with countless pictures on display on a screen on the mantlepiece to illustrate the role she played.

When I stepped out into the beautiful noon sunlight, I felt reinvigorated. That may have been also due, of course, to the excellent King Cole tea and the sugar snaps.



Picture: Roosevelt Cottage at Campobello Island

I wondered over to the Cottage, painted in Roosevelt red and green. Another excellent guide took a small group of people through the building which despite its size with 32

rooms, still oozes the atmosphere of a simple country cottage. The view from the large window across the Bay to Eastport is spectacular. Whatever the dinners are said to fall short in terms of taste, the view more than must have made up for it.

The guide explained that back in the day for the young Roosevelt family - Franklin Junior having been born in Canada – the long summer holidays in July and August was a children's Walhalla.

Every summer of my own childhood, I spent six to eight weeks in the country cottage of my parents in Zeeland close to the sea - nowhere near as large as the Roosevelt's and with some more creature comfort such as cold and hot running water, electricity and oil heating. I could easily picture the Roosevelt kids running around in the woods, playing on the beach, learning to sail around the island from their dad, perhaps on the Half Moon II, the small yacht on which their grandfather James had taught Franklin his navigation skills.

Walking back to the visitor center, I was once again greeted by the three ladies who followed up on their earlier offer to introduce me to Bruce Thomson, the manager of visitor services. I had arrived unannounced, yet Mr. Thomson came over in a matter of minutes from the adjacent administrative building. When I explained I had been inspired by the pictures of Eleanor Roosevelt hosting youth gatherings on the island in the 1940's, he spontaneously offered to take me on little tour to show me the wonderful facilities they have to host groups of up to around 30 people for retreats. They can accommodate even larger groups in cooperation with close by lodgings on the island, when given sufficient notice.

It turned out that the various cottages surrounding the main one do have comfortably equipped guest rooms as well as meeting rooms. A log-style building called the Adams Building has full catering facilities, hosting weddings, conferences and other gatherings.

For those of you who know me, my mind immediately went racing and who knows what may follow in the future in the context of the NAF going back to its origins.

As I had a little bit of time on my hands before I had to head back south, I drove to the far North end of the island to an idyllic light house passing the small fishermen's harbor and the communities of Welshpool and Wilsons Beach.

By the time I crossed the FDR Bridge back into Maine, I fully understood the motto of the Roosevelt Campobello International Park: "a place you choose, not just pass by".

The island may indeed be well off the beaten track, but if you have the chance to take the time, I can warmly recommend a visit to live and breathe the Roosevelt legacy, in a place where Americans and Canadians make borders insignificant and jointly preserve something that has meaning to the world in general and the NAF in particular.

Encore: the Roosevelt Memorial in Washington D.C.

If, for now, this is (a bridge) too far, and you find yourself in the Washington DC Area, please do visit the Roosevelt Memorial between the Tidal Basin and the Potomac River, a twenty- minute walk from the Lincoln Memorial. Franklin Roosevelt himself had declared that he wished any memorial dedicated to him not be larger than the desk in the Oval Office.

Because Eleanor knew that her husband's real legacy was of an immaterial nature and would be best remembered by preserving the change he had brought about in the United States and around the world, the memorial was only completed in 1990. However, walking past the granite stone formations and reading the many well-recognized and highly relevant quotes is an inspiration to retain what is important and good in today's rapidly changing world.

The opinions expressed in these columns are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Netherland-America Foundation or any of its other members or directors. Both the author and the NAF warmly invite anyone – including those far more knowledgeable on any of these subjects - to express and share their views and opinions on this and other topics related to shared values between the United States and the Netherlands and are grateful for feedback and corrections.

ⁱ I will not go into the story of how the border was drawn and how Eastport is part of the United States and Campobello Island and Grand Manan Island, even further south ended up being part of Canada.

ⁱⁱ https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1962&_f=md005145

ⁱⁱⁱ Both reported extensively on their travels to FDR, and in the 1930's shared an bond beyond the professional as evidenced by their correspondence with over 3,000 letters.