Beginning with a restoration project on an 18th-century saltbox, that she named “The O’Rourkery” (fig. 2), and on through the decade long project of planning, constructing, and designing a curriculum for Avon Old Farms School, Theodate Pope Riddle (1867-1946) (figs. 1, 3) demonstrated an instinct, unwavering initiative, and keen sensitivity to not only the art of Architecture but also the immense power of place. Her projects were not just about designing beautiful buildings, but of constructing environments that encouraged an awareness of nature, learning, a sense of home, and legacy. While her body of work is not vast, it is conscientious and intentional, focusing on homes, schools, and historical landmarks.

In 1886 at the age of 19, Theodate Pope Riddle wrote in her diary of a “favorite air castle, that of owning a fine country home in the East, a dairy farm.” By 1889, with the permission of her parents, Theodate Pope Riddle rented and soon purchased “The O’Rourkery”, declaring that she was to have a “guernsey [sic] cow, a pig, and chickens, also a garden & perhaps bees.”

After much encouragement from her father to pursue her interest in architectural design, Theodate began her practical training. She commissioned the architectural firm Hapgood & Hapgood to assist in her plans to restore and refurbish the house. In 1896, that project expanded when she acquired the neighboring property and had the existing 17th-century cottage moved and attached to The O’Rourkery, dubbing it “the Gundy” and eventually setting it up as a small shop for the girls at Miss Porter’s school.
Several years after Theodate began The O'Rourkery project, her father Alfred Pope (1842-1913) began buying land just up the hill, amassing a 250-acre property with the perfect spot atop the knoll for Theodate to bring her dream to reality. In late 1889, she wrote the distinguished New York firm of McKim, Mead, and White, first to ask them to design a house with her specifications in mind, and within a month to insist they use her designs and assign a draftsman to assist in making the plans. Between 1898 – 1901, the house on the hill took shape under Theodate’s precise instruction.

A sprawling white-painted clapboard house, dark green shutters, a gabled roof, dormers, and a prominent portico on the north face, the house embodied that “Colonial Revival” of both the vernacular and high-style traditions (fig. 4). The rambling layout harkened to the old buildings which grew and changed as generations of a family were born or married or moved, a legacy to all who’d called it home. The farm was a testament to the rich agricultural history of the land and a bridge between the village of Farmington and the Pope family. It was an accomplished design, with an infusion of quirky details which made it feel homey and organic, such as the odd side entrance that put visitors in close proximity to the entrance of the kitchen and servants’ quarters unless they turned down the left hallway to the dining room. It was an oddly intimate choice, that humbled the magnification characteristic of a revival house as if to say “yes, it’s grand, but still for living.”

Photo credit: Derek Hayn/Centerbrook
Theodate's first commission came from her friend and mentor, Mary Hillard (fig. 5). Mary had been her first teacher at Miss Porter's School and had been arranging donors to support her plans to open her own girls' school in Middlebury Connecticut. Construction took place between 1907-1909, architect and critic Cass Gilbert called it “the most beautifully planned and designed ... girls' school in the country.” The main building was considered unusual at the time, as it was shaped like a large quadrangle (fig. 6), which created a beautiful enclosed, grass courtyard (fig. 7), a hexagonal cupula sat above the central entrance pavilion, a gothic chapel took form on the east side and cottage-style housing was constructed around the campus. Merging 18th century American Georgian style with elements of 16th century British Architecture, Westover's design gave the air of an academic sanctuary, ready to help channel the intellectual energies of its future students. In a letter, Theodate recounts that one night during construction, she and Mary went out into the courtyard and Theodate said, “Be still and let your spirit fill the buildings.” Rather than a home, a vessel for her family and their collections, this was a vessel for the growth of the next generation of young women.

In 1911, she started a second project in Middlebury: a house for Joseph Chamberlain, a professor at Columbia University, and his wife Elizabeth. “Highfield” (fig. 8), as it came to be known, was another house on a hill, though this one overlooked a lake and the design was inspired by Theodate's recent trip to England. She had spent her trip studying traditional village architecture, looking closely at the work of English Arts & Crafts architects. The house resembled a cottage, with most of its 2 ½ floors tucked away within a sloping shingled roof with narrow dormers. It is situated on its hill to benefit from the expansive views. A sunken garden and summer house complete the estate. Though Theodate veered from her usual use of clapboard siding, she finished Highfield in stucco.
During the “Highfield” project, Theodate was also designing houses for a few of her married employees, who required new lodgings outside of Hill-Stead's Servants’ quarters. The three white-painted clapboard houses took shape on Garden Street of Farmington, just a short walk from Hill-Stead's grounds, and a fourth on High Street. Their construction was also a return to the Colonial Revival vernacular. She was simultaneously working on a country house in Locust Valley, New York for Mrs. Charles Otis Gates (1858-1927). This “Dormer House” (fig. 9), while considered Colonial Revival, did reflect a continued interest in the English village and Arts & Crafts styles, as it utilized beautiful stonework rather than clapboard siding. This country house proved to be the largest domestic construction of Theodate's career and was completed in 1914, though unfortunately, the house burned down in 2014.

It was just a year later, after so many completed projects that New York State began allowing women to be certified as architects. Theodate was granted her certification in 1916 and was elected to become a member of the American Institute of Architects in 1918. During this time, she was commissioned by family friend, Harris Whittemore (1864-1927), to design the Hop Brook Elementary School in Naugatuck Connecticut (fig. 11). Her design was a blend of traditional with state-of-the-art technology. The school was a brick construction in the English and Arts & Crafts style, set back on a sweeping lawn with a separate building for kindergarten. Following in her sensibilities so far, the structures felt old, but inside were the most modern amenities; running water, a ventilation system, cast concrete flooring, and the building which housed the kindergarten, featured details and amenities scaled down to suit the students. The design plans were completed in 1914 and were accepted for the American Architectural League exhibition. Construction was completed in 1916.

In 1918, Theodate received her most prestigious commission from the Women’s Roosevelt Memorial Association to reconstruct Theodore Roosevelt's birthplace in NYC (fig. 10). From 1919 to 1922, Theodate worked to authentically reconstruct the old brownstone and its contents. Making some necessary modifications to accommodate its new purpose as a museum. Her design incorporated the building next door, to house the reference library, temporary exhibitions, memorabilia, and a reading room.
The final and most ambitious undertaking of Theodate’s career was Avon Old Farms School (fig. 12). The idea and design of which began in 1914, with the death of her father, Alfred (fig. 13). She wanted to build a boys’ school in his honor and even helped develop its curriculum, which covered not only the usual academic subjects but also entailed a functional agricultural study program. The buildings around campus were inspired by her earlier trip to England and pulled from the vernacular style of the Cotswold region and the English Arts & Crafts pre-industrial forms. To ensure authenticity, she even told her stone and brick masons to forgo their plumbs and levels, “to give freedom to the stone patterns” (fig. 14). She insisted on using native materials, had the necessary stone cut and quarried on-site, and had those crafting metal hinges, doorknobs and lanterns use the school’s forge. All played out her vision to create a school environment that promoted academic excellence, but also an understanding and respect for the natural world, artisans, and agriculture. This project went on from 1922 to her death in 1946, and she never felt it was quite finished.

As an architect, Theodate often had multiple projects underway at once. From her early musings as a student about wanting a farmhouse to her final professional project, she cultivated her own knowledge base and pursued hands-on training. Early on, Theodate resisted recommendations to apprentice officially at an architect’s office. She was not interested in curbing herself to fit into the male-dominated industry, preferring to adhere to her own ethos. Theodate developed her natural eye for design, trusted her instincts, and incorporated her complex philosophical ideas on home, legacy, education and nature into the construction of her projects.
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