

**Modern Woman:
Edith Bolling Galt Wilson's Interpretation of the Fashions Fit for the First Lady,
1914-1921**



By Sarah Elizabeth Mezzino

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*Front Cover: Candid Photos of Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, ca. 1898 by Harrell's
Edith Bolling Wilson Collection, Box 2A, NT 61.16.575 (7)
Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.*

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Chapter 1: First Ladies, Trendsetters of Fashion

After seven years of being stranded on a deserted island in the South Pacific, fictional Ellen Arden, a witty, Kentucky-born housewife and mother, returns to civilization after seven years only to discover that her handsome husband, Nicholas, has remarried. Although she is astonished by Nicholas' seemingly brash decision, Ellen is determined to win his affections once again. Unfortunately, her outdated clothing hinders her plan. Following a stranger's visibly scornful assessment of her calf-length day dress, Ellen rushes into a ladies restroom and immediately alters her garment by both re-hemming the dress to a fashionable knee-length and removing archaic flounces and other old-fashioned accoutrements. The social implications of not appearing fashionable are overwhelming to Ellen – the general public perceives her as lazy in her personal presentation, unrefined in her knowledge and understanding of the current world (as represented by couture) and even somewhat mad until she reappears in altered attire. Prior to reinventing her image, Ellen has no hope of re-attaining the title of, "My Favorite Wife" in Garson Kanin's 1940 film of the same name.¹

¹ "Familiar Face at Yosemite," *My Favorite Wife*, DVD, directed by Garson Kanin (1940; California: Turner Home Ent., June 1, 2004).

Although this motion picture places a comedic spin on the importance assigned to appearance, it clearly illustrates the relationship between fashion and social acceptance. The relationship is real, and even more clearly understood when it is applied to the constantly metamorphosing role of a public figure, such as America's First Lady. The fashion scrutiny film character Ellen Arden faced in this nearly seventy-year-old cinematic creation remains a relevant model for comprehending the constant barrage of public criticism First Ladies continually receive. Unlike their husbands who are expected to be proficient statesmen and foreign dignitaries with little regard for fashion sensibility, First Ladies must balance the role of, "...manager, diplomat, hostess, champion of causes, political partner...and mother," while being fashionable and frugal as dictated by their respective eras.² With such daunting expectations to fulfill, a First Lady can be either a fashion trendsetter – a "favorite wife" – or a social, and therefore political, liability to her spouse.

The role of First Lady of the United States has a very broad and somewhat vague definition. First Ladies do not apply for the post – the role of First Lady is automatically ascribed by marital status.³ More importantly, once a woman is "appointed," she is more often than

² Rosebush, James S. *First Lady Public Wife*. (New York: Madison Books, 1987), 7.

not perceived to be a possession owned by the nation.⁴ A First Lady loses her personal identity and becomes responsible for the successful exemplification or embodiment of the ideal American married woman. Such overprotective nature extends to the actions of the First Lady in her ascribed position. The First Lady is expected to present herself in a specific manner – professional, compassionate, intelligent, as well as appropriately attired.

Attire reflects social etiquette, fashion trends, and a frugal nature – spending copious sums of money on clothing regardless of the era was and is usually considered unsuitable for the role of the First Lady as she is not royalty, and therefore not entitled to what might be seen as excessive finery. Not surprisingly, female candidates running for national office are also publicly scorned for spending copious sums of money on their attire – 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s “tens of thousands of dollars” wardrobe was largely criticized and did not attain acceptance even with claims that much of what was purchased would be donated to charity.⁵ Thus, the overall success of any First Lady – or future female president or vice president -- in fashion hinges on her personal choice of whether to adhere to social etiquette, to disregard it,

³ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 5.

⁴ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 8.

⁵ Associated Press, “Newsmakers: Sarah Palin,” *The Examiner*, December 3, 2008.

or to carefully alter the perceived notions of acceptable attire for her advantage.

Fashion and social etiquette have changed drastically during the development of the United States and its governing body. Martha Dandridge Custis Washington (r. 1789-1797), the *first* First Lady, followed her husband, George Washington's (1732-1799) lead, and undertook the challenge to balance the extremes between elected official and monarch.⁶ Overshadowed by the Revolutionary War, citizens of this period still equated Martha's newly defined position with European royalty and thus expected her to act in a regal manner and dress in opulent gowns. Martha, however, thwarted their expectations at her husband's inauguration. Upon arriving in New York City, "...she was clothed in the manufacture of our Country, in which her native goodness and patriotism appeared..."⁷ Although there is no documentation that indicates whether this choice in attire was entirely her own, her record of daring and sometimes dramatic behavior including hitting a crude officer and riding her horse onto the front stoop of a building, exemplifies her flare for striking public demonstrations.⁸ Furthermore, she was well acquainted

⁶ According to James S. Rosebush, the exact origin of the term "First Lady" is unknown but many researchers point to journalist Mary Clemmer Ammes' (1839-1884) 1877 printed phrase, " 'First Lady of the Land,'" while referring to Lucy Webb Hayes (r.1877-1881) during her husband's inauguration, as the source. By 1886, the term was "permanently affixed to the presidential wife or official hostess." Rosebush, James S. *First Lady Public Wife*. (New York: Madison Books, 1987), 12. In this paper, the term is applied to all women who fulfilled the role of "First Lady" as a manner of consistency.

⁷ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 38.

with politics for she grew up in Williamsburg, Virginia, and often socialized with government officials.⁹ Fashion became the manner Martha chose to alter the public's initial perception of the president's wife. She chose to use domestically produced fashions as a means of declaring a sense of national pride, and this was celebrated through written descriptions and published illustrations. Not surprisingly both Martha and George, "...dressed exclusively in American made clothing to make a political statement..."¹⁰

According to fashion historian Aileen Ribeiro, "simple tubes of white muslin...had for some time been worn by ladies on the plantations of the French West Indies."¹¹ Unlike present styles which are categorized by age appropriateness, fashions of Martha Washington's era did not heed to such restrictions until the 1770s, and even then progressed very slowly.¹² Children were often dressed in a similar manner as adults, and all adults, regardless of age, were permitted to wear stylish trends if they could afford to do so. Cutting-edge fashions were not designed specifically for

⁸ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰ Rosebush, James S. *First Lady Public Wife*. (New York: Madison Books, 1987), 18.

¹¹ Ribeiro, Aileen. *Dress in the Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 227.

¹² Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress Clothes and Society 1500-1914*. (London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 280.

youth until the 1910s,¹³ and therefore white muslin dresses were worn by matrons such as Martha Washington as well as youth. This style of chemise dress (one-piece and pulled over the head) was known in the high social circles of Europe by the seventeen-seventies. It differed from both the popular “robe à l’anglaise” – a, “half-dress or informal gown,” which had a “...closed front fastening [and was] usually worn over a skirt of a different color,” and the polonaise “a dress on which the back drapery of the overskirt was arranged (through tapes or rings sewn into the side seams) in three puffs or material, in varying lengths.”¹⁴ Regardless of its true European model, the North American chemise dress was popularized and aggrandized by France’s Marie Antoinette in seventeen eighty-three and was thus known as a, “chemise à la reine” – “dress of the queen.”¹⁵ By 1789 the “chemise à la reine” was associated with the tainted Bourbon monarchy and the French Revolution. Yet, Martha Washington’s clever use of coarse domestic fabrics in a color reminiscent of the original West Indian garb linked the role of First Lady to the new world and subsequently, a new nation. Martha was the *first* First Lady to employ fashion as a means of altering social expectations and through her actions became a trendsetter for her era.

¹³ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress Clothes and Society 1500-1914*. (London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 253.

¹⁴ Ribeiro, Aileen. *Dress in the Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 222, 226.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 227.

After her debut as First Lady of the United States, Martha Washington quickly adopted the color white as a signature color. First Lady historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony wrote that Martha, "...seemed always surrounded in white – white muslins, white satins, white dusters, white mobcaps, white hair."¹⁶ In addition to symbolically representing North America, Martha's signature color had other contemporary connotations associated with its use – spiritual purity, beauty, wisdom, and industrial progress. By the late eighteenth century Christianity employed the use of white to represent Christ as "'a light to illuminate the nations.'"¹⁷ (This ideology could also suggest Martha's use of white as a means to promote the United States as a legitimate country among the mainly Christian nations of Europe.) Virginity (commonly associated with white) was not linked to the color white until the "late nineteenth century when Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) recognized the dogma of the Immaculate Conception."¹⁸ Although white had religious connotations, it also was the quintessential element of feminine and masculine beauty. "White skin, synonymous with freshness, was all the rage among the aristocracy [in Europe]."¹⁹ Milky white skin enhanced by various pomades, was a sign of

¹⁶ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 38-40.

¹⁷ Varichon, Anne. *Colors*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006), 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

“wealthy idleness” and over time was, “...progressively replaced in the West by a suntanned glow of ...exotic origin” according to Anne Varichon.²⁰ Despite white’s symbolism, Martha Washington’s white wardrobe also signified wisdom. The natural whitening of hair and the loss of pigment in the skin as one aged implied a vast wealth of knowledge and experiences.²¹ Industrial progress, too, became associated with Martha’s wardrobe. Claude Berthollet (1748-1822), “...discovered the bleaching properties of chlorine,” in the early 1790s thus allowing white fabrics to appear for the first time with a radiating bluish tint.²² Martha Washington’s use of white portrayed her as the up-most patriotic, dignified, informed citizen and leader of a new establishment.

Some of Martha’s successors adopted signature colors as well. Marie (Mamie) Geneva Doud-Eisenhower (r.1953-1961) adopted the color pink. “She wore pink dresses, pink suits, pink shoes, pink bows,” according to historian and presidential daughter, Margaret Truman.²³ However, unlike Martha Washington who used the color white as a political statement with several underlying meanings, psychologists have speculated that since pink is associated with small girls, Mamie was trying

²⁰ Varichon, Anne. *Colors*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006), 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 40.

²³ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 215.

to embody the perception of her husband's female daughter.²⁴

However, Mamie's preference for the color pink could also indicate youth and femininity. Generations later, some First Ladies would copy Martha's use of fashion to make political points without the use of a signature color. Mary Ann Todd Lincoln (r. 1861-1865) bought expensive clothing to help fund the Northern textile industry during the Civil War while Louise (Lou) Henry Hoover (r. 1929-1933) only wore cotton to boost sales during the Great Depression.²⁵ Not all First Ladies were as politically savvy as Martha Washington, Mary Todd Lincoln, or Lou Hoover. (Although Mrs. Lincoln was later chastised by the public for wearing such opulent gowns as her countrymen and women brutally suffered during the Civil War.) Some First Ladies even managed to reverse Martha's intentions of separating the parallels of First Ladies and royalty achieved through the use of domestic textiles, simple styles, and restraint in the number of accoutrements employed to enhance garments. Additionally, Martha Washington's use of domestic textiles set a standard for the necessity of frugality – all of her successors had to find a balance between what would be seen as sensible dress and couture. Not surprisingly, the American populace has on occasion found itself outraged at those who did not fulfill their expectations of what a First Lady should, in their estimation, do.

²⁴ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 215.

²⁵ Rosebush, James S. *First Lady Public Wife*. (New York: Madison Books, 1987), 18.

Martha Washington's immediate successor, Abigail Smith Adams (r. 1797-1801), was jealous of Martha's trendsetting ability. According to First Lady Historian, Carl Sferrazza Anthony, "Lady Washington was still held as a virtuous example by her country women, but Abigail wasn't as successful, even in her attempts to influence fashion."²⁶ Abigail detested the spreading European trends of simple white and light colored Grecian style gowns made of muslin which took hold of the American populace – she wanted women to wear opulent silks.²⁷ Although Martha Washington was able to set fashion standards while First Lady, her use of domestic white cloth had lost its political and symbolic novelty amongst fashion conscience Americans committed to the latest European styles. Yet, the majority of the American populace opted for inexpensive and readily available domestic white cloth (muslin) and thus, Martha Washington's style of dress continue for sheer practicality. Thus, Abigail failed to recognize monetary concerns amid her fellow country women and attempted to reinstate outdated fashion trends of heavy expensive textiles in modest cuts, which had no political or symbolic meaning to entice women to follow her fashion standard. Furthermore, her restrained New England style displayed the lush regal undertones of the Federalist Party her husband represented through lavish textiles, not the then

²⁶ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 67.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

modern, frugal, Grecian preference for muslin. Every First Lady must locate the balance between simplicity, grandeur, and contemporary culture in fashion while being frugal to achieve success in her political role and subsequently her trendsetting abilities. Not surprisingly, some First Ladies whole-heartedly embraced and embellished European styles regardless of cost and attempted to become grand American queens.

Dolley Payne Todd Madison (r. 1809-1817), following Abigail Adams' failed attempt at meeting social expectations through fashion, tried to reinterpret the position of First Lady through chic imported garments.²⁸ Rather than keep her wardrobe choices simple and inexpensive, she spent lavishly on very ornate gowns from France that did not reflect the image of her fellow citizens.²⁹ The garments she purchased internationally most likely included, "...a robe of pink satin, trimmed elaborately with ermine, a white velvet and satin turban with nodding ostrich plumes," which was documented by one of her admirers.³⁰ Fortunately, Dolley's skills as a political hostess during a turbulent era as well as new fashion trends overshadowed her disregard for the fashion standard set by Martha Washington. Julia Gardiner Tyler (r. 1844-1845) and Helen (Nellie) Herron Taft (r. 1909-1913) heightened the regal perception of the First Lady

²⁸ Dolley Payne Todd Madison served as the official White House hostess for both Thomas Jefferson (r.1801-1809) and her husband, James Madison, Jr. (r. 1809-1817). Rosebush, James S. *First Lady Public Wife*. (New York: Madison Books, 1987), 80.

²⁹ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 85.

³⁰ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 23.

through both lavish attire and over zealous formal etiquette. Julia Tyler donned lavish gowns while, "she received her guests ...seated in a large armchair on a raised platform with a 'court' of a half dozen or so ladies-in-waiting ...dressed in white. At times she wore a headdress of miniature gold bugles which resembled a crown."³¹ Similarly, Nellie Taft hired an African American staff for the White House and made them all wear "blue livery."³² These three First Ladies received much scorn from the American public and their actions were not repeated by their immediate successors. Regardless, fashion remained a focal point of the position of First Ladies and some women had such an impeccable sense of socially acceptable attire that they, too, became national and international trendsetters.

Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy's (r. 1961-1963) sense of dignified style appealed to many citizens. Shockingly, however, Jackie's style (along with her husband, John F. Kennedy's (1917-1963) style) was considered "elitist" and scandalous during the beginning of the Kennedy Administration. American Historian James T. Patterson wrote, "...others were put off by the elitist tone of his [Kennedy's] administration. 'All that Mozart string music and ballet dancing' ... one congressman remarked,

³¹ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 294.

³² *Ibid.*, 108.

'all that fox hunting and London clothes. He's too elegant...' " ³³ Jackie's elegant style which was similar to that of her husband's, however, was first perceived as improper by many American citizens especially during the Kennedy presidential campaign -- she wore skirts and dresses with unusually short hemlines³⁴. Yet, Jackie, with the help of her friends [fashion editor Diana Vreeland (1903-1989) and designer Oleg Cassini (1913-2006)] and television redeemed her American image and created a style using historically poignant garments and aspects of popular fashions among French politicians' wives³⁵. To Cassini, she insisted that her garments should be unique so they could always appear in a separate light from her surroundings.³⁶ The Russian-born designer succeeded in creating an iconic wardrobe that has been echoed for decades.³⁷ " Cassini showed her a fawn-beige wool coat, with small sable collar and muff and a matching pillbox hat. Cassini urged her to wear this outfit to the inauguration. 'All the other women will be wearing [full-length] furs. This

³³ Patterson, James T. *America in the Twentieth Century a History, Fifth Edition*. (New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 382.

³⁴ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 588.

³⁵ Historian James T. Patterson stated, "In the TV age of the 1960s ...style and image frequently counted for as much as substance." Patterson, James T. *America in the Twentieth Century a History, Fifth Edition*. (New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 378.

Vreeland, Diana. *D.V.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 223.
Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 33.

³⁶ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 33.

³⁷ Although many citizens liked the elegant styles that Cassini designed for Jackie Kennedy, he also had numerous critics who accused him of pillaging designs from French courtiers. However, no evidence exists to support such accusations. Severo, Richard and Ruth La Ferla, "Oleg Cassini, Designer for the Stars and Jacqueline Kennedy, Dies at 92," *The New York Times*, March 19, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/fashion/19cassini.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed January 17, 2009).

coat will set you apart, emphasize your youth. It will set the tone for the whole administration.' " ³⁸ Jacqueline Kennedy's style was truly unique and appropriate for her role as First Lady.

Although Jacqueline Kennedy's style was distinctive, distinguished, and imitated by the public – one advertisement during her tenure in the White House stated that women could purchase the whole Jackie "look" for under \$70.00 -- it did not truly represent the American public but rather new advancements in globalization.³⁹ Diana Vreeland interpreted Jackie's success as a trendsetter to her, "...put a little style into the White House and into being First Lady of the land."⁴⁰ Vreeland stated,

I can remember Jackie Kennedy, right after she moved into the White House, telling me what it looked like. There were no flowers anywhere, there was no place to sit, no one was expected...it was awful. ...All that changed with the Kennedys. As you know, the White House changed. And the whole country changed. I couldn't believe it happened so quickly, so beautifully – and so easily. How did it happen? Jackie Kennedy...suddenly [made] 'good taste' become good taste. Before the Kennedys, 'good taste' was never a point of modern America – at all. I'm not talking about manners – standing up when a woman comes into a room. The Kennedys released a positive attitude toward culture, toward style...and, since then, [Americans have] ...never gone back.⁴¹

³⁸ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 32.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁰ Vreeland, Diana. *D.V.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 223.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

Thus, Jacqueline Kennedy became a trendsetter. Unfortunately, good taste in her wardrobe came at a cost. Similar to Dolley Madison's shopping in France, Jackie spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on her wardrobe with little regard to the necessary balance between grandeur and frugality.⁴² Fortunately, the stable economy of the early 1960s and the simple cuts of Jackie's wardrobe allowed Americans (and foreigners) of varying ages to emulate her style inexpensively. Furthermore, the elegant rhetoric of her husband fostered feelings of extreme good will in the nation towards his administration.⁴³ Therefore, similar to Dolley Madison, Jackie's spendthrift nature was easily forgiven by her country women. Ironically, years later Nancy Davis Reagan (r.1981-1989) followed Jacqueline Kennedy's model and purchased couture clothing such as a James Galanos white satin one-shouldered sheath to wear to her husband, Ronald Reagan's inaugural celebration.⁴⁴ She justified such purchases as being political – she was trying to bolster the American fashion industry (as both Mary Todd Lincoln and Lou Hoover had done).⁴⁵ The public was outraged at her blatant disregard of the strained

⁴² Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 38.

⁴³ Patterson, James T. *America in the Twentieth Century a History, Fifth Edition*. (New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 386.

⁴⁴ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 156.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

economy and the hardships her fellow citizens were suffering and thus, she failed to attain the type of acceptance afforded Jacqueline Kennedy.

Each First Lady's chosen role seems to have hindered her ability to dress in certain styles. Nancy Reagan considered herself to be a housewife whereas Jackie Kennedy was a mother and an academic. Therefore, Jackie's worldly education permitted her to wear couture clothing (according to American social expectations) whereas Nancy Reagan was not affiliated with such achievements and her choice to ascribe to such a role through fashion was publicly scorned. Defining a public image for a First Lady is extremely complex – she must balance American conceptions of frugality, grandeur, contemporary culture while strictly adhering to her own personally defined role of mother, academic, dignitary, etc.

Other trendsetting First Ladies include both Frances Folsom Cleveland (r. 1886-1889 and 1893-1897) and Grace Anna Goodhue Coolidge (r. 1923-1929). Frances Cleveland's success in being a national trendsetter spawned from her physical beauty – she was young (the youngest First Lady at the age of 21) and statuesque – and her generosity while entertaining the public, international heads of state, and political bigwigs.⁴⁶ Shortly after her induction to the White House, women across

⁴⁶ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 299-300.

the country began to mimic her clothing and hair styles and subsequently, she became the public image for numerous goods.⁴⁷ Although her dresses were sometimes considered distasteful – “...waist cut low in the neck, and the arms were bare from the shoulder to the elbow...”⁴⁸ – she remained the pinnacle of fashion during her tenure as First Lady. Grace Coolidge’s success as a fashion trendsetter was due to her husband’s exquisite sense of style. Calvin Coolidge often purchased clothing for his wife and even encouraged her to spend lavishly on her attire.⁴⁹ Grace’s style before becoming First Lady was “restrained” and did not follow most fashion trends of the nineteen-twenties.⁵⁰ Yet, through her husband’s guidance, “she was modern without being vulgar. Her skirt lengths were not as high as the more radical designs of the time, but she used bright primary colors, white cottons, and light pastels in flat-chested, low-hipped dresses.”⁵¹ Thus, Grace’s wardrobe was often the subject of many magazine and newspaper articles and American women copied her restrained, yet liberated style.

Over the course of America’s history, many First Ladies have made their mark on fashion and become trendsetters while others have faded

⁴⁷ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 300.

⁴⁸ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 264.

⁴⁹ Truman, Margaret. *First Ladies*. (New York: Random House, 1995), 248-249.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵¹ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 409.

into the past with little regard for their attire. All First Ladies have had to balance their attire between simple frugal garments and lavish gowns while adhering to the demands of styles dictated by contemporary culture. Some First Ladies have even used fashion to make political statements and boost both the garment and textile industries. Where, does Edith Bolling Galt Wilson (r.1915-1921), the second wife of president, Woodrow Wilson and subject of this thesis, fit into this spectrum? As we shall see, Edith Wilson bridged the gap between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and embraced the modern era in both her mindset and fashion – her unique style impacted the wardrobes of her successors and altered the perceived notions of appropriate attire for women in the American political sphere.

Chapter 2: Fashion History, 1870- 1925

Margaret Mitchell (1900-1949) described the last years of the 1860s and the early 1870s in her 1936 novel *Gone With the Wind* as: "...An era that ...[was] crude, garish, showy, full of over-dressed women, overfurnished houses, too many jewels, too many horses, too much food, too much whisky."⁵² Although this stereotype captured the ugliest aspects of her lead character's persona – the famous southern belle, Scarlett O'Hara – it failed to accurately document the lives of real southerners affected by the American Civil War (1860-1865). Poverty struck prominent families, as well as the working class and farmers. Indeed, those who were once privileged became destitute. Some Union soldiers raided and ransacked plantation homes and crops for supplies during the war, often destroying houses in their wake, much like the fate of Mitchell's fictitious Wilkes' estate, Twelve Oaks. Other southerners were forced to sell their properties after the dissolution of slavery, for without workers the plantation system could not be lucrative. While the characters and plantations in Mitchell's work were creations, the experiences her characters witnessed were based on actual people like

⁵² Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1936), 1222-1223.

Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, who, was born in Wytheville, Virginia on October 15, 1872 to William Holcombe and Sallie White Bolling.



Fig. 1 William Holcombe and Sallie White Bolling, ca.1898
Woodrow Wilson House Museum

The Bolling family lost their plantation during the war and struggled to rebuild their lives during Mitchell's described era of excess.

Edith Bolling was a product of what Margaret Mitchell labeled the "Old Guard" – devoutly patriotic southerners who upheld strict codes of social etiquette associated with the ante-bellum era. Mitchell stated: "The Lost Cause [Southern States rights] was stronger, dearer now... Everything about [the war]...was sacred, the graves of the men who had died for it, the battle fields, the torn flags, the crossed sabers in their halls, the fading letters from the front, the veterans. [The Old Guard]...gave no aid, comfort or quarter to the late enemy..."⁵³ In actuality, some of the real "Old Guard" even refused Union charity. Edith wrote in her highly successful 1939 memoir, *My Memoir*, "There was great rejoicing in the cabins at the sight of food, but neither my grandmother nor my mother...

⁵³ Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1936), 1222.

would touch it.”⁵⁴ The loss of their plantation and subsequently their source of wealth fostered both anger and jealousy towards northerners, as did the actions of some southerners who made money by rejecting their former ways of living. Although Edith did not witness the Civil War, let alone her family’s loss of property and money, she undoubtedly comprehended the separation between the wealth of the Northern states and the poverty of the Southern states. With such humble beginnings in a politically and morally charged atmosphere, it is not surprising that Edith created and maintained a sense of style that was both practical and proper. Yet as a young woman, she sometimes demonstrated natural curiosity for the fashions associated with more liberated women and even pushed the envelope of acceptable attire during her tenure as First Lady (for reasons which will be explained later in this paper).

Fashions for women at the time of Edith’s birth were sumptuous, often laden with superfluous accoutrements. Many early-nineteenth century technical developments directly contributed to accessible extravagant fashions by the end of the century. These developments included the creation of aniline dyes in 1856 by W.H. Perkins, which for the first time permitted textile makers to produce rich, varied colors in cloth that natural dyes could not achieve, such as mauve⁵⁵. Additionally, the

⁵⁴ Wilson, Edith Bolling. *My Memoir*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 2.

development of the sewing machine (Howe;1846/Singer;1851); the Jacquard loom (Joseph Marie Jacquard;1804-5); and the power loom (William Gilmore;1816) (along with an increased number of immigrants entering the country to wield such devices) allowed both textile manufacturers and dressmakers to create complex designs for a broader audience.⁵⁶ Furthermore, by the end of the century, ready-to-wear garments became available to the general public through mail order catalogs and retail establishments. Thus, by the 1870s garments such as the, "jade-green watered silk dress" that Scarlett O'Hara donned and Margaret Mitchell further described as, "...cut low over the bosom and the skirt was draped back over an enormous bustle and on the bustle was a huge bunch of pink velvet roses" were possible and popular.⁵⁷

To support such elaborate ensembles, women continued to wear both chemises and corsets, the latter of which were industriously made via steam molding by the 1870s.⁵⁸ Such technical developments helped to

⁵⁵ Doering, Mary. *Costume Class (Spring 2008)*. (Washington, DC: Mary Doering, 2008), *Growth and Development of Clothing 1840-1870*, Slide 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Slide 27.

Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. "Jacquard Loom,"

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/299155/Jacquard-loom> (accessed January 10, 2008).

Rivard, Paul. *A New Order of Things: How the Textile Industry Transformed New England*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 46-48.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1936), 1297.

⁵⁸ Doering, Mary. *Costume Class (Spring 2008)*. (Washington, DC: Mary Doering, 2008), *Growth and Development of Clothing 1840-1870*.

shift the erogenous zone for women from the waist to the breasts – the previously noted factory manufactured corsets lifted the breasts higher than previous undergarments. Earlier styles for women emphasized large hoop skirts that placed the erogenous zone on very tiny waists. Margaret Mitchell described Scarlett's obsession with her small circumference: "...As for her waist – there was no one ...who had so small a waist. ...The green muslin [dress] measured seventeen inches about the waist."⁵⁹

Furthermore, the erogenous zone for women began to extend to the buttocks. Crinoline hoops fell from fashion at the end of the 1860s and bustles became quite popular through the 1870s and 1880s. Bustles could be crafted from small, flexible wire hoops or stuffed padding. By her late teens, Edith would have both a corset and a bustle to support her clothing. However, by the 1890s she had to alter these undergarments to suit new fashion trends.

Fashion styles for women from the 1870s through the 1890s were complex, regimented, and more often than not dictated by couturiers in France, such as the illustrious House of Worth (1858-1956). Victorian etiquette delineated specific dress styles for certain events.⁶⁰ This

⁵⁹ Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1936), 105-106.

⁶⁰ The term "Victorian" applies to the era indicated by the reign of the British monarch, Queen Victoria (r.1837-1901) and the, "...ideals and standards of morality and taste prevalent during the reign [of the Queen]" (Webster's Dictionary, 1084). Although the term more often applies to English style (architectural, decorative, or fashion affiliated), since the mid-twentieth century the term has also been applied to American fashions of the nineteenth century.

included, "...morning clothes, day clothes, clothes for informal or ceremonial visits, private or formal dinners, informal evenings, balls, theatre parties..."⁶¹ Fashion historian Francois Boucher explains; "The choice of gown, its material and neckline, the hat and coat or cloak were all subject to almost ritual prescriptions, from which one could not depart without appearing lacking in education."⁶² Such rules for dressing were well known to Edith and her family even if they did not have the monetary resources to adhere to each prescribed trend.

Among such changes in fashion was the reemergence of the eighteenth-century polonaise as a fashionable trend atop the bustle.⁶³ However, it was modified slightly to include having a long or short train which was often bordered with various forms of ornamentation depending on changing trends.⁶⁴ Historical references in fashion were popular. Some gowns adopted eighteen-century square necklines and even Elizabethan-style textiles and collars. Additionally, aprons, tunics, and backwards sweeping princess gowns dominated the finest social gatherings along with an overwhelming amount of accessories – belts,

⁶¹ Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 394.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 394.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 394.

Bertha collars, flounces, etc.⁶⁵ Overall, the sumptuous styles of the 1870s and 1880s celebrated the benefits of America's Industrial era.

However, such lavish fashion trends were not worn by the entire female population. Women of the lower classes were forced to endure physical labor and required less restrictive garments. (Some wealthy women who could afford extensive trips and wished to participate in sports also looked for less restrictive clothing.) Families with meager incomes, such as the Bollings, were limited in what could be made or even purchased. Thus, simpler costumes were created including the emergence of the walking suit in 1888. Derived from early equestrian riding costumes which copied men's suit tailoring for a women's garment, the two-piece walking suit also embodied aspects of the women's dress reform movement which actually began in 1851 with the emergence of bloomers.⁶⁶ By the 1870's the reform movement was furthered by the medical profession's proclamation that corsets used to achieve the stylish "'Grecian Bend'" (stature women adopted from wearing high heels and polonaise/bustled gowns which thrust one's posture forward), hindered childbirth and fertility.⁶⁷ Thus, some brave women challenged fashionable

⁶⁵ Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 394.

⁶⁶ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 236.
Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 374.

⁶⁷ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 229.

trends and Victorian etiquette and refused to wear corsets, tight gowns, bodices, and jackets. These women, pictured by Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), donned, "...loose waisted gowns cut with wide armholes and a dropped shoulder line..."⁶⁸ Dubbed "Aesthetic Dress," this manner of garb conjured historic styles of late Medieval and early Renaissance Europe. However, few women actually embraced this fashion trend for Victorian etiquette associated loose clothing with loose morals.⁶⁹ By the 1880s, however, the two-piece tailored suit became a symbol of the newfound freedoms afforded to women – golf, bicycling, yachting, tennis, and the ability to enter the previously male dominated workforce.⁷⁰ Thus, the range in clothing styles available to women began to expand drastically during this era and Edith embraced them by wearing suits.

Styles of the 1890s continued to adhere to the Victorian standards of prescribed outfits for both times of the day and certain events. However, by this decade the erogenous zone shifted from the buttocks to the shoulders and arms. Generally women donned a dress with a train and puffed sleeves or shoulders.⁷¹ The sleeves grew to enormous sizes and often mimicked the 1830s gigot or "leg'o'mutten" styles.⁷² Long coats,

⁶⁸ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 229.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

pointed shoes, synched waists (called the “wasp waist”) and large rounded hats oversaturated with feathers and flowers became fashionable and Edith owned and wore the garments listed above.⁷³ Yet, women also more readily accepted and wore tailored suits. The suit became acceptable garb for day wear or professional work attire and consisted of, “...an untrimmed matching fitted jacket and a gorged A-line skirt and was usually made of wool...Often it was worn over a blouse with an uncomfortably high stiff collar and could be combined with masculine accessories such as waistcoats, neckties, and straw sailor hats...”⁷⁴ Not surprisingly, the suit was still associated with both sporting activities and masculine attire. Fashion historian Jane Ashelford wrote that the adoption of masculine style clothing for women showed their newfound equality.⁷⁵ Although the concept of women dressing in male garb to achieve sexual equality might seem peculiar, it has occurred since the Egyptian Middle Kingdom 2040-1650 B.C. – Queen Hatshepsut (r. 1501-1481 B.C.) was always portrayed as, “...a divine king, with red or yellow skin, blue eyebrows, and false beard.”⁷⁶ Yet, masculine trends in fashion began to

⁷¹ Ibid., 237.

⁷² Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 237.

⁷³ Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 395-400.

⁷⁴ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 236.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 236.

fade by the early 1900s with the emergence of the prominent "S" curve or goddess figure.

The "S" curve originated from the tenuous swirls and lines of Art Nouveau (ca. 1890-1905) which was then translated into the appearance of the female form – tall and curvy.⁷⁷ Although Edith was graced with a figure which embodied this aesthetic preference, many women achieved this silhouette through exaggerated hair styles (where padding was sometimes used to raise the hair), large hats (decorated with birds, flowers, and feathers), and a streamlined silhouette.⁷⁸ Corsets were redesigned and had, "...extra-long flat-fronted [portions], boned so that it threw the hips back and the bust forward," which created the signature "S" contour.⁷⁹ Additionally the "S" curve corset transformed the shape of the bust into a single protruding mass also known as the, "mono-bosom." Many times women actually used corset covers to enhance the size of their "mono-bosom." Furthermore, many women began to wear what was called, "combinations" or "chemise-pantaloons" to eliminate bulk underneath their curve-clinging garments.⁸⁰ Overall, what was worn

⁷⁶ Hartt, Frederick. *Art A History of Painting Sculpture Architecture Fourth Edition*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 86.

⁷⁷ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 246.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁸⁰ Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 401.

underneath clothes of this period altered the overall shape of the entire ensemble worn by women.

Clothing of the early twentieth-century or Edwardian period continued to both adhere to Victorian standards of etiquette and Parisian fashion trends. Yet, women (including Edith) also looked towards the British royal family as fashion role models. According to historian Pauline Stevenson, "...women tried to copy the beautiful and friendly queen [Alexandra], even imitating the limp she acquired, as the result of an illness."⁸¹ Clothing of this era was oversaturated with, "...jewels, lace, and embroidery" attached to delicate fabrics.⁸² And there was a general preference for, "...pale pinks, mauves, soft blues, and greens, all shades of gray, buff, and stone..." among the decade's day dresses, tea gowns, suits, and evening attire.⁸³ The distinctive look of this period meant that, "the train [of the skirt] disappeared, followed by the collar. [Bodices continued to have very high collars.] The skirt, which fitted closely over the hips, spread out at the foot like a flower...and sleeves...tightened."⁸⁴ The waistline was placed above its ordinary position and the silhouette was thus, lengthened.⁸⁵ The tailored suit became

⁸¹ Stevenson, Pauline. *Edwardian Fashion*. (London: Ian Allan Ltd., 1980), 9.

⁸² Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 249.

⁸³ Stevenson, Pauline. *Edwardian Fashion*. (London: Ian Allan Ltd., 1980), 19.

⁸⁴ Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 400.

acceptable day-wear for more formal occasions and was thus included in "town dress."⁸⁶ As the decade progressed, skirts began to shorten in length and even decrease in volume. Hats, too, began to be reduced in size. By 1910, Asian influences permeated French designs (and even the White House – Helen Louise Herron Taft (r.1909-1913) used Japanese lanterns and solicited the donation of Cherry trees) and the "hobble skirt," "kimono bodices," and contrasting colors became in vogue.

Fashion from 1910 to 1920 reflects the prosperity and mirth of Europe before World War I and the sadness, poverty, and heartache during the war. The beginning of the decade showcased the designs of Paul Poiret (1879-1944) whose styles were very "...simple and severe in shape with a straight, tubular skirt, devoid of any fussy decoration or rigid corsetry."⁸⁷ Known as a "hobble skirt," it was a binding straight garment which barely allowed the legs to move.⁸⁸ It was so difficult for women to move in "hobble skirts," that cartoonists and even musicians poked fun at the binding garment – "The Hobble Skirt Walk One Step" by Bertram LeStrange parodied the short truncated walk of women with marcato (accented)

⁸⁵ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 252.

⁸⁶ Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 400.

⁸⁷ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 253.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

eighth notes.⁸⁹ Regardless of the physical discomfort, Poiret's designs and even choices of colors became extremely chic. "He [Poiret] wrote in his *Autobiography*, that he threw out 'lilacs, swooning mauves, tender blue hortensias, Nile greens, maizes, straws, all that was soft, washed-out, insipid,' and replaced them with 'reds, greens, violets, royal blues...I carried with me the colourists when I took each tone at its most vivid, and I restored to health all the exhausted nuances.'" ⁹⁰ These bright colors combined with a new silhouette were also paired with Asian influences and accents such as turbans with tall plumes of feathers. Yet, Poiret's designs were not the only fashions which greatly influenced the public -- the Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russe (costumes and sets designed by Leon Bakst (1866-1924) permeated society with a modern version of Eastern European patterns, styles, and bright colors.⁹¹



Fig.2 Preparatory Design for Rooster Motif, 1922-1923, Evergreen House Johns Hopkins University.

⁸⁹ LeStrange, Bertram. *The Hobble Skirt Walk One Step*. (London: Ascherberg, Hopwood & Crew Ltd., 1909).

⁹⁰ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 253.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

Unlike Poiret's designs, the exotic nature of the Ballet Russe even extended to new forms of interior design which included painted floors and leopard skin rugs.⁹² Edith, however, did not wear such cutting edge fashions during this era for she was in mourning for her first husband Norman Galt, who died in 1908, and thus, she crafted her own style by using aspects of new designs mixed with former trends. However, by 1914 and the outbreak of World War I, women like Edith eschewed the bright exotic clothing of the early part of the decade for simpler garments that for the first time in hundreds of years allowed them to move freely and permitted them to join the war effort and subsequently the workforce.

Fashion during World War I was not dictated by the courtiers of France or productions of the Ballet Russe. Rather, fashion became much more practical. Physical labor and the need to move about freely dominated female attire. Corsets, which Edith used during her youth, had begun to fade from fashion by 1910, and gradually banished altogether as were hobble skirts. Women wore military-inspired attire that often included trousers while working for the war effort. Common day wear became simple suits or dresses with natural waistlines and fuller, shorter skirts made from plain materials.⁹³ The prominent British

⁹² Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996, 253.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 255.

firm Redfern (1888-1929) flourished during this era.⁹⁴ Colors, once again were muted, which reflected the somberness of war in Europe. Yet, evening attire remained formal and glamorous with sumptuous textiles, beadwork, and fur; however, by the end of the decade it, too began to experience reforms for the benefit of movement.⁹⁵ With the 1919 signing of the Treaty of Versailles, fashion once again was dictated by European designers though not limited to French courtiers. Impresario Coco Chanel (1883-1971) popularized resort attire with shorter skirts and jersey fabric which freed women further from restraining garments. With Chanel's influence, the flapper style emerged and the restrictive garments of the nineteenth century were eliminated.

Overall, fashions for women drastically changed during the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. Technical developments in textile and garment manufacturing allowed women to have more choices and variety in their wardrobes. Additionally, political and social reforms such as women's dress reform and women's suffrage, as well as historical events such as World War I, helped women to establish themselves as sexual equals in fashion by allowing them to eliminate corsets and other restrictive garments and don

⁹⁴ The House of Redfern was actually established by the English tailor, Redfern, in the 1890s. He began the business by creating yachting garb for women on the Isle of Wright. Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 267.

⁹⁵ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 255.

flexible suits and even to an extent, pants. Born to this era, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson epitomized this period in fashion and embraced liberal styles of dressing for women while remaining practical and refined.

Chapter 3: Edith Bolling Galt Wilson's Image

Born in 1872, shortly after the dawn of female dress reform, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson was well versed in the importance of appropriate attire for women. The carefully crafted image she developed during her years as First Lady combined post-Civil War Southern mores, aspects of a burgeoning women's liberation movement, an awareness of popular fashion trends, and an understanding of how to properly dress her own Junoesque figure. Although her distinctive manner of political dress evolved over years, it altered expectations for acceptable State attire.

Prior to her 1896 marriage to Norman Galt (1866 – 1908) when she was 24 years old, Edith's fashion choices were more often than not based on practicality. She was the seventh of eleven children born to parents who had lost their livelihood during the war. Thus, many of her early garments were home-sewn and not of the highest quality. Edith admitted in her memoir that she was not a very skilled seamstress and failed miserably in her youth at making suits for two young men; her mother and grandmother sewed most of her clothes⁹⁶

Her obsession with her own appearance began while she visited her sister, Gertrude, in Washington, D.C., in 1890, and had the opportunity to

⁹⁶ Wilson, Edith Bolling Galt. *My Memoir*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 7, 21.

hear Adelina Patti sing.⁹⁷ According to her account, Edith wore an old school garment made of, "...dark green plaid cloth" to the concert.⁹⁸ Her impudent nature of wanting to see Patti trumped the standards of dress for evening attire for the theater which Edith biographer, Alden Hatch, described as: "...Ablaze with jewels and fine feathers, every man in a white tie and tails, the women in extravagant creations from Paris and flashing tiaras, filets and circlets."⁹⁹ It is not surprising that "Edith had a sinking moment in her green plaid" while at the concert and henceforth, was meticulous about her appearance.¹⁰⁰

Fig. 3 Green Plaid Jacket (Basque) ca.1887
Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection



The garment of "green plaid cloth" which Edith wore to the theater in 1890 is in the collection of the Woodrow Wilson House Museum and is an example of late 1880s styles for women in America. The jacket is crafted from a woven plaid silk taffeta and lined with cotton. It has a high standing collar and is tightly fitted with a pointed front and back. Silver

⁹⁷ Gertrude Bolling Galt (1863-1962), second of eleven Bolling children, was Edith's oldest sister. She married Alexander Hunter Galt (1860-1935) in 1885. Alexander Galt was the cousin of Norman Galt (1866-1908), Edith's first husband.

⁹⁸ Wilson, Edith Bolling Galt. *My Memoir*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 17.

⁹⁹ Hatch, Alden. *Edith Bolling Wilson*. (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1961), 49.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

ball buttons line the closure and the cuffs while the sleeves have a slight puff along the shoulder seams. Although Edith describes the outfit as being both “worsted” or made of wool and a “dress” in her memoir, her account is presumably incorrect – “Some of the stories in her autobiography contradicted others that she had previously told...” -- and thus, many small details such as the type of fabric a garment was made of have proven to be wrong.¹⁰¹ Regardless, the surviving jacket possesses hallmarks of her use including some crude tailoring – the shoulders and sleeves were widened and the waist was let in and let out multiple times.¹⁰² The need for such drastic alterations coincided with Edith’s unfortunate experience at the Martha Washington College in Abingdon, Virginia where she was purportedly nearly starved to death.¹⁰³ Her lanky figure (at fifteen she was five feet nine inches tall) emphasized her emaciated condition; she was known among her classmates as the “Gray Spider.”¹⁰⁴ Although Edith left school and spent the following year recuperating, she regained little weight and was still remarkably thin in

¹⁰¹ Caroli, Betty Boyd. *America’s First Ladies*. (New York: Doubleday Direct, Inc., 1996), 196.

¹⁰² Woodrow Wilson House Museum Accession and Conservation Files, 1967, 2004. File number 61.17.15.

¹⁰³ Both Alden Hatch and Edith in her memoir describe very harsh conditions at the Martha Washington College. The school allegedly had no heat, a foul tempered head master, and little food. Hatch, Alden. *Edith Bolling Wilson*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1961), 47.

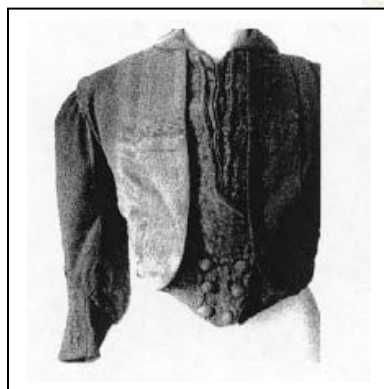
¹⁰⁴ Hatch, Alden. *Edith Bolling Wilson*. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1961), 48.

1890, hence the jacket's narrow cut. Overall, the simple jacket is an example of the types of garments Edith wore prior to her first marriage.

Although Edith put more effort into her appearance after her theater fashion faux pas, her clothing was still remarkably plain until she wed successful Washington jeweler, Norman Galt, in 1896. The lack of decoration in her wardrobe from 1890 to 1896 can simply be attributed to insufficient funds. Although women of her era began entering the workforce, Edith continued to survive on her family's income. An example of her pre-marital wardrobe is an extant wool broadcloth strolling suit from 1896.

Fig. 4 *Far right*: Drawing of the Strolling Suit (rear view), 1896. Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection

Fig. 5 *Right*: Detail of jacket from Strolling Suit, 1896. Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection.



The three piece black suit (shirt, jacket, skirt), has a two-part jacket with a turn-down collar, narrow bodice, and broad shoulders evoking a military style.¹⁰⁵ The inner bodice of the jacket has small pleats and hooks to close the garment. The outer part of the jacket has two long narrow tails which

¹⁰⁵ Woodrow Wilson House Museum Accession and Conservation Files, 1975, 2004. File number 61.17.7. (A-C).

attach to the lower central back and fall just past the knee. The skirt has a high waist and short train. The shirt is made of ribbed black wool and chiffon and has a high collar, long sleeves, and fitted waist. Although the garment seems binding by today's standards, the suit actually allotted the wearer mobility. Edith was extremely active and enjoyed hiking and playing golf. Thus, the garment fulfilled her needs while being somewhat fashionable as suits were still relatively new to the female wardrobe; it was, however, still very plain.

Following her marriage to Galt, Edith's figure and wardrobe drastically changed. Pregnancy helped to enhance her blooming Junoesque figure; in 1903, she gave birth to a son who died within a few days. And Norman's sizable income allowed her to purchase for the first time extravagant clothing.¹⁰⁶ Garments from the first years of Edith's marriage most likely included pieces crafted and designed by Norman's sister, dressmaker Annie Galt Fendall (dates unknown). Although Annie's presumed work for Edith has been lost, Edith wrote fondly of creations she made for her sister Gertrude in 1903.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of their family

¹⁰⁶ Established in 1802, Galt & Bro. Jewelers was a family-run Washington, D.C. business that catered to the political community. Presidents including Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) and John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) purchased jewelry and silver from Galt & Bros for themselves and as gifts of State. First Ladies such as Julia Boggs Dent Grant (r. 1869-1877) and Frances Folsom Cleveland (r.1886-1889) were also personal customers. In 1908, Edith inherited the business and it subsequently passed to the store's employees but kept the original family name. After nearly two hundred years, the store closed in 2001, with the owners refusing to sell to a larger American jewelry corporation. Freud, Chares Paul, "D.C. Jewels The Closing of a Historic Shop is a Triumph of Meaning over Means," *Reasononline*, July 2001, <http://www.reason.com/news/show/28092.html>.

connections, by 1907, Edith abandoned locale dressmakers and her sister-in-law for Parisian couture.

Edith and Norman traveled to Europe during the summer of 1907. During this trip, Edith was permitted to visit and purchase gowns and suits from the prestigious House of Worth located at *7 Rue de la Paix, Paris*.¹⁰⁸ At the time, women, "...gained entry only with a reference from another of Mr. Worth's clients;" although Edith's reference is unknown, it may possibly have come through one of Norman's business clients.¹⁰⁹ Edith wrote fondly of her first visit to the shop in her diary: "We went to Worth's where we found Madame Birat all ready for us & we went up to the 3rd floor where we had a beautiful time seeing all the new things...we finally decided on the new shade of heliotrope for every suit I ordered."¹¹⁰ Edith's order extended beyond the suits she mentioned in her diary. She also purchased an elegant day dress made of pastel green and pink

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Edith Bolling Galt Wilson to her mother, Sallie White Bolling, June 25, 1903. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Collection, Box 1 Folder 2. Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁸ Englishman Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895), began a Parisian dressmaking business in 1858 with his business partner, Otto Bobergh (1821-1881). They quickly gained popularity with European royalty and aristocracy for their opulent designs and individualized attention to each customer. Unfortunately, the shop closed for the duration of the Franco-Prussian War. Worth, however, reopened the shop alone in 1871 and women including wealthy Americans flocked to his studios along with his already established European clientele. After his death in 1895, his two sons Jean-Philippe (1856-1926) and Gaston-Lucien (1853-1924) took over the business, eventually passing it along to their descendants until the business was purchased by the House of Paquin in 1954 and closed in 1956. Coleman, Elizabeth A. *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 9-24.

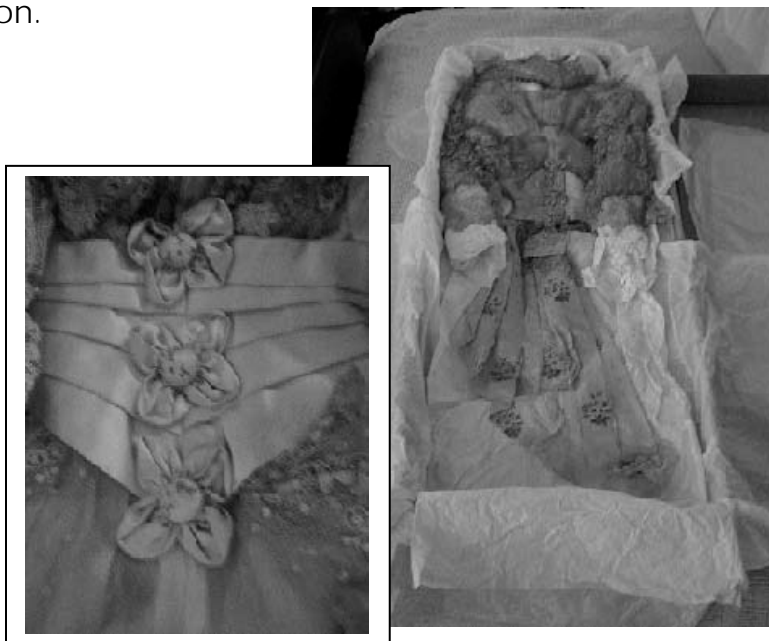
¹⁰⁹ Flanagan, Alice K. *Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, 1872-1961*. (New York: Children's Press, 1998), 26.

¹¹⁰ Diary of Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, August 27, 1907. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Collection, Box 1 Folder "Diary Notes." Library of Congress.

embroidered silk, adorned with lace, which survives in the Woodrow Wilson House collection.

Fig.6 Far Right:
House of Worth
Day Dress, 1907
Woodrow Wilson
House Museum
Collection

Fig. 7 Right:
Detail of the Day
Dress' waist



This dress has a high lace collar, long lace sleeves, high pointed waist, and an elongated skirt with weighted train.¹¹¹ The opulent fabric, a hallmark of Worth's creations, has since severely deteriorated. Research indicates this rapid deterioration as the result of "sizing applications, and other chemical treatments applied to change the hand, or feel [of the fabric]..." which can include silks, satins, or taffetas.¹¹² The specific chemicals used for such an application are unknown, but may have included arsenic and lead. With such fragile materials it is understandable why Edith was only able to keep one garment from her first trip to the House of Worth.

¹¹¹ The House of Worth Day dress is in extremely poor condition.

¹¹² Coleman, Elizabeth A. *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 69.

Edith's first Worth day dress was constructed specifically for her and encompasses a conglomeration of elements from the firm's existing designs. Similar waist and skirt styles exist in the company's records presently housed at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Fashion Museum in Bath, England. The montage of elements from Worth's existing designs used to construct her garments became customary for her wardrobe. For almost two decades, Edith created her own signature look by hand-selecting specific cuts and decorations for her clothing. Thus, Edith kept her look fresh and unique.

Worth's salon at the time of Edith's visit was an extravagant venue intended for glamorous clients.

"This establishment in Paris looked more like an embassy than a store...Young men dressed in black uniforms escorted visitors through a series of rooms piled high with luxurious silks, velvets, and woolens. Only then did the shopper enter the display room, where gowns hung on wooden forms. If a gown took her fancy, the visitor could try it on and step into the salon de lumière, specially fitted with mirrors and gas lights to produce an evening atmosphere."¹¹³

Yet, by this era Worth's appeal was in decline. In 1895, Charles Frederick Worth (1825-1895) the father of couture and obviously the shop, died thirty-seven years after the business had been established.¹¹⁴ The business then passed to his two sons, Jean-Philippe (1856-1926) and

¹¹³ Flanagan, Alice K. *Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, 1872-1961*. (New York: Children's Press, 1998), 26.

¹¹⁴ Coleman, Elizabeth A. *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 9.

Gaston (1853-1924). Gaston managed the administrative side of the business while Jean-Philippe designed merchandise. Although some of Jean-Philippe's designs during the decades following his father's death were quite revolutionary for their era, most of his work remained somewhat conservative to appeal to an aging clientele.¹¹⁵ However, for Edith Wilson who grew up in rural Virginia, the mystique of Worth's garments overshadowed the house's decline. She recalled in her memoir,

"We were in one of the private salons...when a *vendeuse* came timidly in to ask if she could show [Jean-Philippe] Worth some material which a lady had selected for an evening coat and of which she was sure he would not approve. ...Two others [*vendeuse*] appeared, one bearing a roll of orange-colored velvet for the coat, the other a piece of chartreuse green for the lining. Worth took only one look, then [cried] in French: 'Take it away! I cannot stand it! ...I am sick and cannot do anymore today...' Whereupon all the women rushed around as though he were dying."¹¹⁶

Worth's flamboyant behavior was overlooked by his praises for Edith's healthy American figure. Jean-Philippe is quoted as saying, "'Ah, if I could hire you as a mannequin my fortune would be made.'"¹¹⁷ Although Edith never admitted to modeling for Jean-Philippe there is a series of photographs within his 1907 design records which document a voluptuous young woman who looks remarkably like Edith. Overall, Edith's admiration

¹¹⁵ Coleman, Elizabeth A. *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 23.

¹¹⁶ Wilson, Edith Bolling Galt. *My Memoir*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 270.

¹¹⁷ Hatch, Alden. *Edith Bolling Wilson*. (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1961), 52.

and loyalty to the design house established the tone of her style for the rest of her life.

Edith's style after her trip to Europe with Norman in 1907 grew from sophisticated practicality (as represented by the previously noted black strolling suit) to refined elegance (as represented by the lace and silk day dress by Worth). Worth's fashions of the time were punctuated by the Edwardian preference for all-over decoration and asymmetrical lines. Diagonal swags crossed necklines and the top layer of skirts were pulled towards the right or left hip. Although asymmetry fell from fashion in the nineteen-teens, Edith continued to wear this style into the twenties where asymmetry was once again revived around 1925 with the Paris exposition. Fashion historian, costume designer, and Assistant Curator of Costumes and Textiles at Hillwood Museum & Gardens, Howard Kurtz, states that asymmetrical lines are used to reduce the appearance of one's size. "Well placed asymmetrical designs can be very flattering to many female figures. Usually when I am designing costumes for the stage, I use asymmetrical elements to diminish a large bust and hip line and create a smaller looking waistline."¹¹⁸ Worth may have suggested the use of asymmetrical lines to Edith to reduce the appearance of her Junoesque figure which she became very self-conscious of during her later years. Her self-consciousness towards her figure was most likely heightened due to

¹¹⁸ Howard Kurtz, e-mail message to the author, August 22, 2008.

the preference for boyish figures in flapper attire and the gradual disappearance of the corset during the 1920s. In her 1920 portrait by Seymour Stone where she dons an asymmetrical dress created from black velvet and white net, she had Stone repaint the image to reduce the size of her mid-section.



Fig. 8 *Left*: Portrait of Edith Wilson by Seymour Stone, 1920
Woodrow Wilson House
Museum Collection

Fig. 9 *Right*: Black Net Evening Dress, ca. 1900-1910
Woodrow Wilson House
Museum Collection



In the process of repainting the portrait, Stone failed to repaint the back of the chair in which she posed. Other asymmetrical garments that Edith donned include the remnants of a black net evening dress from 1900-1910. The dress appears to be one-shouldered with a corresponding asymmetrical v-neck opening on the back and a decorative belt with buttons down the backside of the left hip. The skirt hugs the hips and flairs out towards the ground with a small train. According to Harold Koda, Director of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the dress most likely had a second piece of an alternative

fabric which was a second shoulder and long sleeve.¹¹⁹ Additionally, Edith also wore as First Lady a black evening gown with an asymmetrical skirt edged with silver beading, and a black evening gown decorated with fans made from gold sequins and a gathered asymmetrical skirt. Thus, asymmetrical lines were one way in which she chose to slim her figure. Specific color choices in her wardrobe may have also played a part in her attempt to reduce her midsection.

Edith's first husband, Norman Galt, died in 1908 nearly one year after their trip to Europe. Having no heirs, Norman left his family business (accompanied by countless debts) and his entire estate to Edith. His handwritten will states,

"I give, devise and bequeath unto my beloved wife, Edith Bolling Galt, and to her heirs and assign forever, all my estate, real, personal and mixed of whatsoever kind and wheresoever situated, as well that which I now own and possess as that which I may hereafter acquire and die seized and possessed of. I nominate, constitute and appoint my said wife, Edith Bolling Galt, to be the sole executer of this my last will and testament..."¹²⁰

Although Galt & Bro. Jewelers was in a dire state when Edith became its owner, with the help of the store's employees and Edith's lawyer, Nathaniel Wilson (dates unknown), it eventually became profitable once

¹¹⁹ Conversation between Harold Koda and the author, October 17, 2008.

¹²⁰ Norman Galt, will dated September 29, 1898, filed on February 3, 1908, no. 68, folio 213, Office of the Secretary, Washington, D.C.

again. Edith was provided with a usually substantial salary from the business until her death and she was able to afford garments that exceeded one thousand dollars.¹²¹ Yet, even though Edith was able to purchase extravagant garments from European couturiers after Norman's passing, she had to do so under the Victorian standards for mourning.

The process of mourning was often complicated during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. According to fashion historian Jane Ashelford, there were three stages of mourning. The first was, "deep mourning" which lasted a year or more and required the mourner to completely cover herself (dress and veil) in plain black clothing made of wool, crape, silk, or tulle depending on the time of day or event while being secluded from society.¹²² A woman in mourning could only wear black jewelry and had to avoid flowers or ribbons as adornment.¹²³ According to Margaret Mitchell, women in mourning could not "chatter...or laugh aloud" and if they smiled, "it must be a...tragic smile."¹²⁴ This was followed by a slightly less stringent second year, whereby women were permitted to socialize more frequently.¹²⁵ The last

¹²¹ Murphy, Claire. "Dressed for the Occasion" 1988 Exhibition Notes. Woodrow Wilson House Museum Archives. Washington, DC.

¹²² Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 237.

¹²³ Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1936), 187.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

stage was described as, "half-mourning," and could last for the remainder of a woman's life.¹²⁶ In general, mourning attire, "should [not] shine" or be white in color.¹²⁷ However, half-mourning let women wear fashionable ensembles but in dull shades such as gray or mauve.¹²⁸ If a woman failed to adhere to mourning etiquette, she was considered immoral. Margaret Mitchell's *Scarlett O'Hara* challenged such mourning rules when she accepted Rhett Butler's invitation to dance one year after the death of her first husband.¹²⁹ Not surprisingly, the crowd around her was both startled and appalled.¹³⁰ Although a fictional scenario, the social implications of disregarding mourning were real and thus, it is understandable that Edith Wilson used mourning attire from 1908 to 1961 with two exceptions – a dull fuchsia velvet evening gown and a peacock blue brocade evening gown both from the early 1930s which are presently housed at the Woodrow Wilson House Museum¹³¹.

¹²⁵ Hell, Kyshah, "Victorian Mourning Garb," *Morbid Outlook*, http://www.morbidoutlook.com/fashion/historical/2001_03_victorianmourn.html (accessed January 17, 2009).

¹²⁶ Ashelford, Jane. *The Art of Dress*. (London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 239-240

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 239-240.

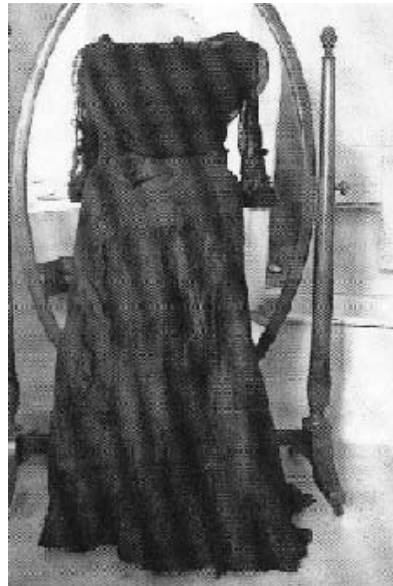
¹²⁹ Margaret Mitchell's character Scarlett was married three times within the novel. Her first husband was Charles Hamilton, followed by Frank Kennedy, and ending with Rhett Butler.

¹³⁰ Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With The Wind*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1936), 267.

¹³¹ No information exists as to why there are two garments which do not apply to mourning attire standards.

Edith's use of mourning attire extended mostly to her specific choices in color. For over fifty years she wore black, grey, mauve/lavender, and white. (One dress in the Woodrow Wilson House collection represents her style in deep mourning – a dress crafted from black silk taffeta and black net dating to the first decade of the twentieth century. The dress has a black silk taffeta inner layer plus an outer silk taffeta skirt with train. Black net is sewn to the bodice (which is boned) and is shaped to form a scoop neck line decorated with black rosettes. The rosettes also decorate the $\frac{3}{4}$ length net sleeves. An ornamental belt wraps around the waist and the skirt is full.)

Fig. 10 Black Mourning Dress, ca. 1907 Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection



Although some lore suggests she wore such specific colors to bring out the hue of her eyes – Alden Hatch states that her “laughing eyes...changed from blue to violet,” – it is also quite possible that she wore black to slim

her figure.¹³² Additionally, it is fathomable that she continued to wear half-mourning colors because they were also the authorized colors of British court officials (Anglophiles tried to copy the British Royals and officials – suggesting a more refined and sophisticated image.) Edith witnessed the power of the British judicial system in 1913 writing; “We went to the Law Courts in the Inns...while the court was in session – this was eventfully grotesque but interesting.”¹³³ However, Edith’s use of half-mourning colors in her wardrobe from 1915 to 1961 is more likely an attempt to appease the public during her courtship, marriage, and subsequent First Ladyship to President Woodrow Wilson. Edith met and married Wilson in 1915. Although their courtship would be considered normal by today’s standards, it was very scandalous for the time. Barely in mourning for a year over the death of his first wife, Ellen Axson Wilson (1860-1914), President Wilson aggressively pursued Edith after being introduced to her over a cup of tea. White House officials were not shocked by the president’s actions for they considered Edith to be his perfect match. Irwin (Ike) Hood Hoover, the mansion’s then Chief Usher, described Edith as, “an attractive lady – good to look at and with a taste for clothes.”¹³⁴ Colonel Edmund Starling, a member of the President’s

¹³² Hatch, Alden. *Edith Bolling Wilson*. (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1961), 14.

¹³³ Letter from Edith Wilson to her Family, August 23, 1913. Box 1, Folder 4, Library of Congress.

¹³⁴ Hoover, Irwin Hood. *Forty-Two Years in the White House*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 62.

Secret Service detail, described Edith in greater detail. He stated: "She was, indeed, a fine figure of a woman, somewhat plump by modern American standards, but ideal from the viewpoint of a mature man. Her face was not only lovely, but alive."¹³⁵ Starling witnessed the courtship between the president and Edith and could attest to the late night visits to Edith's house in Foggy Bottom which became topical gossip in the newspapers. Starling wrote, "[Woodrow Wilson] wanted to walk back to the White House [from Edith's house at 1am]... We walked briskly, and [he] danced off the curbs and up them... If we had to wait for traffic...he jiggled a few steps, whistling an accompaniment for himself... 'Oh you beautiful doll! You great big beautiful doll! Let me put my arms around you, I can barely live without you...'"¹³⁶ With documented accounts of the non-traditional courtship, it is not surprising that gossip and rumors abounded, nationally.¹³⁷ A popular joke was, "'What did Mrs. Galt do when the President asked her to marry him?'"¹³⁸ The reply: "'She fell out of bed.'"¹³⁹ But even more scathing was a *Washington Post* article that stated, "'The President...spent much of the evening entering Mrs.Galt.'

¹³⁵ Starling, Colonel Edmund W. *Starling of the White House*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 49.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹³⁷ Victorian etiquette would not permit a man to visit a lady late at night, unless in the event of an emergency. Furthermore, pre-marital relations and dating while in mourning were considered immoral.

¹³⁸ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 355.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 355.

Alice Longworth [Edith's arch enemy.] said the deletion of 'tain' from 'entertaining' was no mistake."¹⁴⁰ To avoid more slanderous press, Edith most likely took advice from Rudolph Foster, the White House's Executive Secretary who, according to Starling overlooked, "all White House documents, state papers, proclamations, engagements, pardons, appointments, questions of government procedure and etiquette, manners of style, etc."¹⁴¹ And, thus she continued to appear in mourning to appease the public.

Edith's half-mourning attire during her years in the White House was strikingly elegant yet, conservative, and it continued to define her sense of style. She continued to purchase Worth gowns and suits, regardless of their price, to keep her stylish image. The Worth garments she dressed in during the first year of her courtship to Woodrow Wilson were purchased directly from the couturier's Paris salon. Such garments included the, "black tailored suit" she wore the day she met the President.¹⁴² Yet, after they began courting, Edith became acquainted with Kurzman Importer (a New York City based firm that acquired and sold Parisian couture) through the White House and purchased most of her opulent clothing from them while her husband was in office.

¹⁴⁰ Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies*. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 597-598, 355.

¹⁴¹ Starling, Colonel Edmund W. *Starling of the White House*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 36.

¹⁴² Wilson, Edith Bolling Galt. *My Memoir*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 56.

Kurzman Importer was started by Michael Kurzman in 1862 and originally was a millinery shop.¹⁴³ Over the decades, the shop and its owners gained prestige as they traveled to Paris to seek new fashion trends. By 1906, the firm was hired to create a spectacular \$750.00 hat, which used lace once owned by France's Empress Josephine, as a wedding gift for Alice Roosevelt Longworth and, henceforth, the firm was associated with the White House.¹⁴⁴ In 1913, Kurzman expanded into the import and sale of ready to wear fashions for women, and the design/creation of an original clothing line.¹⁴⁵ In 1914, they created and imported presidential daughter Eleanor Wilson McAdoo's (1889-1967) wedding trousseau.¹⁴⁶ (Woodrow Wilson had three daughters – Margaret Woodrow Wilson (1886-1944), Jessie Wilson Sayre (1887-1933), and Eleanor Wilson McAdoo.) With such an established relationship between the firm and the White House it is not surprising that Edith Wilson ordered her 1917 inaugural gown and wedding dress (and subsequent trousseau) from Kurzman Importer. Her inauguration dress, now owned by the Smithsonian Institution, has an asymmetrical line at the neck and skirt (which was a

¹⁴³ New York Times, "Julius C. Kurzman Dead," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1922, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

¹⁴⁴ The Washington Post, "Hat For Miss Roosevelt," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1906, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

¹⁴⁵ Marconi Transatlantic Wireless Telegraph, "Fashion Buyers Organize," *New York Times*, March 5, 1913, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

¹⁴⁶ Rittenhouse, Anne, "The Trousseau of the White House Bride," *New York Times*, May 3, 1914, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

hallmark of Worth's designs) and is white in color with embroidered flowers and net cascading from the shoulders. Edith's black velvet, \$1,300.00, Worth winter wedding dress was the epitome of fashion for a widow in 1915. Victorian etiquette states, "At a formal wedding, the bride, unless she has been married before...always wears white. ...Some brides choose gowns that they can wear out and 'get the good of' in the honeymoon year."¹⁴⁷ Edith most likely followed such etiquette standards because researchers at the Woodrow Wilson House Museum have suggested that a black velvet dress, dating to 1935-1940, in their collection was made from her wedding dress.

Fig.11 *Far Right*:
Black Velvet Dress,
ca. 1935-1940
Woodrow Wilson
House Museum
Collection



Fig. 12 *Right*: Detail
of neckline and
sleeves



The existing garment has undergone significant alterations. It is a one piece ankle length dress with, "...small puffed sleeves and shoulder pads.

¹⁴⁷ Laughlin, Clara E., ed. *The Complete Hostess*. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1906), 137.

... [It has a] Heart shaped neckline ... [and a] Natural waist line with two belt loops at each side.”¹⁴⁸ As for her trousseau, Edith wrote to her then soon to be husband, stating, “...We went to Kurzman and Sons and got an afternoon dress then we went to A. Jaeckel and Co. the fur store and I was recklessly extravagant in your gift of a coat. They will make it for me of caracul and Yukon. The price would be nearly \$1,000, but they will make it for me for \$475.”¹⁴⁹ Edith’s trousseau also included a black velvet evening gown, which is also owned by the Smithsonian. This elaborate gown is decorated with tulle, jet beads, and sequins and has a long train attached to a relatively narrow skirt (not a hobble skirt).¹⁵⁰ It also has an unusual square neckline with two velvet straps that flair out in a “V” form from the center of the bust, around the neck, and terminates between the shoulder blades.¹⁵¹ Although the gown may have seemed lavish it was actually re-made three times before its notable debut at Buckingham Palace during World War I.¹⁵² Edith wrote, “I wore my black velvet & everyone liked it – The Queen was in gold brocade with her jewels & was

¹⁴⁸ Woodrow Wilson House Museum Accession and Conservation Files, 1961, 2004. File number 61.16.2942.

¹⁴⁹ Murphy, Claire. “Dressed for the Occasion” Exhibition Notes, 1988. Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection.

¹⁵⁰ Truett, Randle Bond. *The First Ladies in Fashion*. (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1954), 68-69.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵² Gerlinger, Irene Hazard. *Mistresses of the White House Narrator’s Tale of a Pageant of First Ladies*. (New York: Samuel French, 1948).

splendid to look up at.”¹⁵³ Although Edith’s clothing from Kurzman was beautiful, her wedding purchases through the firm associated her with an international scandal.

In 1915, the “French Syndicate of Leading Couturiers” – a professional network of prominent fashion designers in Paris -- felt that both Kurzman owners, Julius and Charles Kurzman (father and son), were German sympathizers.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, the syndicate accused the Kurzman firm of illegally reproducing couture models (ready to wear garments) for sale in the United States.¹⁵⁵ With such allegations made public, Kurzman Importer was blacklisted by the syndicate and Edith’s purchases were placed under scrutiny. The House of Worth, along with other members of the Syndicate, offered to give her the gowns she requested for her trousseau directly from their respective Paris salons (Edith’s wedding dress was eventually exempted from the scandal – it was purchased and shipped before the allegations became public), Edith kindly refused the offer with a public announcement on November 23, 1915 citing she had made “other arrangements.”¹⁵⁶ The embarrassment

¹⁵³ Letter from Edith Bolling Galt Wilson to her family, January 2, 1919. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Collection, Box 2, Folder 2. Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁴ The Washington Post, “Gown to Cost \$1,300,” *The Washington Post*, November 25, 1915, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

¹⁵⁵ The Washington Post, “Glad to Make Gowns,” *The Washington Post*, November 21, 1915, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

caused by the scandal led Edith to slowly distance herself from both her beloved couture and Kurzman Importer- she turned to high end American apparel.

World War I also hindered Edith from purchasing couture garments, even when she could get to such salons herself. With the war raging in Europe many couturiers could not continue their business. The House of Worth became a temporary hospital for wounded soldiers, including Jean-Philippe.¹⁵⁷ Yet, some houses (including Worth) attempted to move forward with their creations even with economic and physical setbacks. Fashion during the war years was drab often mimicking military colors such as "blue soldat" (a grey blue which was the same shade as the French Army uniforms) and military uniforms themselves such as Zouave suits and jackets.¹⁵⁸ (Such trends are characteristic of war, with similar apparel having been created for women during the American Civil War. Additionally, uniform-style clothing became increasingly popular as women were more involved with the war effort through groups such as the American Red Cross. Edith was involved with the Red Cross and often dressed in a boxy white dress uniform with apron. Worth actually designed uniforms for women during World War I, but did not create the

¹⁵⁶ The Washington Post, "Refuses Paris Gowns," *The Washington Post*, November 24, 1915, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

¹⁵⁷ The New York Times, "Paris Shops Show New War Styles," *The New York Times*, February 1, 1915, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Red Cross attire.) Unfortunately, prices for garments were greatly inflated. During her trip to Paris for the Peace Treaty talks in 1919, she wrote: "I went this week to look at dresses, etc. & came away sadder & wiser – for the prices are perfectly impossible – hard by anything under 1500 francs, in our money 3 hundred dollars. Everyone is aghast at the prices of everything...Grapes sell for eleven dollars a bunch, pears 2 dollars each & bananas 60¢ a piece. In comparison, Washington is cheap."¹⁵⁹ Knowing that she had to appear fashionable during the Peace Talks, Edith resorted to her Virginia sense of practicality to achieve a polished appearance. She wrote, "...My new maid is really a treasure...she is embroidering a shirt waist for me and it is lovely. I saw one like it & priced it – the price was \$60.00 or 300 Francs. So I naturally did not buy it and now by letting her do the embroidering & I the cutting and fitting I will duplicate it for less than ten dollars."¹⁶⁰ Although Edith saved money on her embroidered shirt waist, she did purchase a "Blue Soldat," Worth-manufactured, wool suit in 1919. The still extant suit has a geometrically embroidered design on the tiered jacket with a contrasting Art Nouveau style floral design on the silk shirt. Geometric embroidering was a hallmark of Worth's designs during the first decade of the twentieth century and something favored by Edith. (Edith purchased an embroidered geometric bodice between

¹⁵⁹ Letter from Edith Bolling Galt Wilson to her family, June 20, 1919. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Collection, Box 2, Folder 2. Library of Congress.

¹⁶⁰ Letter from Edith Bolling Galt Wilson to her sister Bertha, April 17, 1919. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Collection, Box 2, Folder 2. Library of Congress.

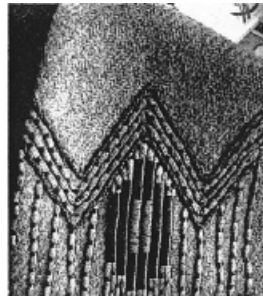
1900 and 1910. In the 1930s and 1940s, she continued to favor such designs, purchasing a series of geometrically themed dresses.) Most importantly, however, the suit has a calf length skirt which allowed Edith greater mobility and linked her to the popular trends of shorter hemlines.

Fig. 13 *Far Right*: House of Worth Suit, 1919
Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection



Fig. 14 *Above Right*: House of Worth Suit Shirt

Fig. 15 *Below Right*: Detail of Geometric Embroidery



Edith's love for couture, mourning colors, and asymmetrical lines continued after she and President Wilson left the White House in March 1921. Shortly after his death in 1924, Edith returned to Europe and visited Redfern. In a letter addressed to her family she wrote: "Paris seems packed & jammed with Americans – and more arriving on every ship. I have seen very little difference in the way people dress here from our own. The little tight felt hats are a-la-mode & dresses are very short – long coats for it is still cold. But I suppose when we go to...Redfern's we will see

new pretty things.”¹⁶¹ She purchased from the couturier a knee-length black velvet day dress with long sleeves and a straight flapper style skirt -- which was actually the last piece of European couture that she ever bought.

Fig. 16 *Far Right: Redfern Black Velvet Dress, 1924*
Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection

Fig. 17 *Below: Detail of the asymmetrical flounce*
crafted from the lining.



The dress epitomized the new found sportswear which for women – comfortable, loose, and chic. Yet, the dress also showcased her innate practicality. As styles changed and returned back to asymmetrical lines, Edith (wanting to keep abreast of trends) was forced to use her modest knowledge of dressmaking.¹⁶² Thus, she ripped the lining from the upper portion of the dress, split the seam in the skirt, and turned the lining into an asymmetrical flounce. The craftsmanship is crude and similar to other alterations made to Edith’s garments from the mid-1920s to her death in

¹⁶¹ Letter from Edith Bolling Galt Wilson to her family, May 31, 1925. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson Collection, Box 2, Folder 3. Library of Congress

¹⁶² After Woodrow Wilson’s death in 1924, Edith was forced to maintain her new townhouse on S Street using only her income from Galt & Bro. Jewelers. This task was difficult especially during the 1930s and thus, Edith resorted back to her Virginia practicality.

1961. A ball gown of the 1930s (made by a local seamstress from material she most likely purchased during her travels in Asia) shows similar handiwork – the train of the skirt was crudely cut off and used as a makeshift patch.



Fig. 18 *Right*: Black and Gold Gown, ca. 1930 Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection

Fig. 19 *Above*: Detail of patch



Fig. 20 *Above*: One of Edith's boxes of fabric scraps Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection

Edith became so accustomed to "reworking" her own garments (especially during the depression) that she actually removed beading, lace, and other extravagant materials from weathered garments to save for future use – Woodrow Wilson House Museum currently has fifteen boxes of such remnants. Yet, throughout all of her repairs, Edith's style remained static – she had a preference for asymmetrical attire in mourning colors.

The clothing Edith purchased after the Great Depression, 1940-1961, was punctuated with distinct pieces from Rizik's – a high-end department store located in Washington, DC. The current owner of the store, Ms. Maxine Rizik Tanous, recently wrote: "Mrs. Wilson was a very frequent visitor to Rizik's. She would select her outfits and have them tailored here on the premises. There are no records today of her dresses...but we still have her alteration form in store which is still in use."¹⁶³ Two garments from Rizik's exist at the Woodrow Wilson House Museum -- a black suit and an afternoon dress with black lace over chartreuse satin.



Fig. 21 Above Left: Rizik's 1940 Black Suit, Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection

Fig. 22 Above Right: Rizik's Black and Chartreuse Afternoon Dress, ca. 1940, Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection

Neither the suit nor the dress has Edith's signature asymmetry but they both adhere to half-mourning color etiquette. The black wool suit, which

¹⁶³ Letter from Ms. Maxine Rizik Tanous to the author, August 8, 2008.

she continued to wear until her death, is characteristic of the World War II era – the skirt (according to fashion historian Claire Murphy) is a very odd length which adheres to the strict material rations of the era.¹⁶⁴ It also is in keeping with basic suits from the present day– it has a square-cut jacket with two buttons along the front closure and four smaller buttons at the cuffs of the jacket’s long sleeves. The jacket is lined with black crepe which is also used for the lining of the matching A-line skirt. A black lace and chartreuse satin afternoon dress, also from the war era, has a masculine feel; the shoulders and back of the collar are padded giving the wearer a very broad and boxy appearance. The added massing of the upper portion of the dress visually slims the straight-cut skirt. The dress also has a thin, wrap-around belt and short sleeves. Overall, it is extremely well made and rivals the European couture which Edith once purchased.

Overall, Edith’s style hardly changed during her lifetime. From her Virginia upbringing during the Reconstruction of the South she developed a sense of practicality which she often used to save money when attempting to be fashionable. She upheld the Victorian mores that were instilled in her by her Civil War-era parents, adhering to mourning etiquette from 1908 to 1961 in honor of her husbands. She eventually learned from the most famous of French couturiers that an asymmetrical line in clothing was very flattering to her statuesque figure and she employed the

¹⁶⁴ Conversation between Claire Murphy and the author, July 10, 2008.

technique whenever trends would permit her to do so. Thus, her life's experiences influenced her character and were transmitted through her sensibility and modernity in dress which she often used to her advantage personally and politically.

Chapter 4: Comparisons between Edith's Dresses, designs by Worth, and her contemporaries

Although Edith Bolling Galt Wilson was America's First Lady between 1915 and 1921, she shared an international spotlight with other politically involved women, socialites, and royalty. With such a broad spectrum of popular figures, it is remarkable that she created her own distinct image amidst increasing globalization. Her style, crafted from couture and sometimes her own hands, allowed her to gain popularity among her fellow American citizens and helped male political figures see her and subsequent First Ladies as potential, if not necessarily constant equals.

Increased globalization in the nineteenth century (aided by technical developments during the Industrial Revolution like the telegraph in 1837 by Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872)) allowed fashion trends to quickly spread from Europe to the American continent. Ladies fashion magazines published throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century (such as *Harper's Magazine*, created in 1850) showed new and exciting ways to wear clothing and even one's hair. Additionally, advertising increased through billboards, newspapers, and other mass-produced publications. Thus, names like Charles Frederick and Jean-Philippe Worth became almost commonplace – especially since their creations were also

mentioned in the society columns of American newspapers. Women, like Edith, were well aware of the European aristocracy's preference for Worth's designs during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Thus, many women, including Edith, tried to copy their precedent.

Worth's clients were wealthy Americans as well as European royalty, nobility, and aristocracy. The couturier was associated most often with the Empress Eugénie (1826-1920), wife of Napoleon III, and their court – he made all of her “state and evening wear, court dresses, elaborate street clothes, and masquerade costumes.”¹⁶⁵ The Empress was so popular and influential that other royals soon followed her example, including the Queen of Hungary and the Queen of Sweden.¹⁶⁶ By the end of the century, Jean-Philippe even believed that he and his father were making dresses for Queen Victoria and her court-- they had received orders requesting gowns of unusual proportions which mimicked the Queen's dimensions.¹⁶⁷ Not surprisingly, wealthy Americans looking to emulate fashionable royalty, such as Edith, flocked to the courtier.

Americans comprised a majority of Worth's business. Part of Worth's American achievements were due to his association with society's elite. Yet, most of his American success can be traced to his unique sales

¹⁶⁵ Coleman, Elizabeth A. *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 14, 94.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

strategies. "American clients pressed for and were granted individual consideration...American customers never [wanted] to look at models: the clients preferred the attention of the master, who would drape fabrics as he described an imagined design."¹⁶⁸ With such lavish attention combined with glamorous designs it is not surprising that Vanderbilts and Morgans patronized the firm.¹⁶⁹ Other prominent American customers were noted art connoisseur Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), Boston socialite Marian "Clover" Hooper Adams (1843-1885), and New York socialite Caroline Webster Schermerhorn Astor (1830-1908) and her daughter, Caroline Schermerhorn Astor (1861-1948).¹⁷⁰

Beyond the social sphere, the talents of Worth proved an invaluable contributor to the feminine side of political life. Virginian Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor (1879-1964), the first woman to serve as a Member of the British Parliament, is credited with helping establish another fashion trend adopted by Edith via her own association with the House of Worth. Indeed Astor was instrumental in defining the color black as acceptable attire for a woman's political wardrobe.¹⁷¹ Journalist for the *New York Times*, Rose E. Feld wrote; "Black is the garb of the House of Parliament;

¹⁶⁸ Coleman, Elizabeth A. *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 90.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 101, 93.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 90-93.

¹⁷¹ Conversation between Harold Koda, Director of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the author, October 17, 2008.

but as far as can be ascertained Lady Astor is rarely seen in anything else."¹⁷²

Fig. 23 *Right*: One of Sarah Polk's Inaugural Gowns, 1845
James K. Polk
Ancestral Home,
Columbia, TN



Even earlier, First Lady Sarah Childress Polk (r. 1845-1849), wife of 11th president James Knox Polk (1795-1849) may have been on the cusp of cutting edge fashion in 1845 – Sarah Polk's inaugural gowns were purportedly designs of Charles Frederick Worth while he was working for silk mercers, Lewis and Allenby.¹⁷³ Isabel Anderson (1876-1948), wife of American diplomat Larz Anderson (1866-1937), and resident of

¹⁷² Feld, Rose E, "Lady Astor's Ways in Parliament and Out," *The New York Times*, April 16, 1922, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?r=1&res=9901E4DE1339E133A25755C1A9629C946395D6CF>

¹⁷³ Email from Tom Price, Curator of Collections at James K. Polk Ancestral Home, to the author July 2, 2008.
Coleman, Elizabeth A, *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 9.

Washington, DC, wore numerous Worth gowns. In her husband's published journals and letters he stated on November 2, 1911, "Isabel has already started in on dressmaking. She ordered two Court dresses that Mr. Worth is going to design especially for her and make very simple: one of pale pink brocade with silver flower design, and the other of white brocade with gold design."¹⁷⁴

With ties to politics and the monarchy, it is understandable that Edith Wilson would turn to Worth before and during her years in the White House. Yet, Worth's ties to actresses and singers may have been the ultimate decision making factor in Edith's loyalty and love for the salon – Worth designed clothing for opera singer Adelina Patti (1843-1919), who Edith saw perform the night she realized she needed to prescribe to Victorian fashion etiquette.¹⁷⁵ Overall, like many of her American counterparts, Edith shopped at the House of Worth.

Although Edith purchased clothes from Worth, her attire was more often than not different from her contemporaries. She, with the help of Jean-Philippe (or Kurzman), picked and chose elements from his repertoire to construct an entire outfit. An example of such elements includes the lavender brocade dress she donned for her 1916 White

¹⁷⁴ Anderson, Isabel, ed. *Larz Anderson Letters and Journals of a Diplomat*. (New York, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1940), 297.

¹⁷⁵ Coleman, Elizabeth A, *The Opulent Era: Worth, Doucet & Pingat*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 106.

House portrait by Adolpho Muller-Ury. The dress, which was another piece from her trousseau, had a plunging “V” shaped neckline constructed of white lace and lavender brocade.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, the garment had a large faux flower corsage attached to the center of the bust. Worth created a similar dress in the summer of 1910, with a slightly higher “V” neckline and larger corsage for his ready to wear collection.¹⁷⁷ Even though Edith credits Worth with the creation of her dress, the international scandal caused by her trousseau would suggest that this was indeed another design pilfered by Kurzman.

Fig. 24 *Right*: Portrait of Alice Warder Garrett, 1915 Evergreen House Johns Hopkins University



Although her attire was fashionable, before, during, and after her tenure as First Lady, she was not avant garde. The Baltimore-based Alice Warder Garrett (1877-1952), a follower of Léon Bakst and the Ballet Russe, was

¹⁷⁶ Wilson, Edith Bolling. *My Memoir*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 306.

¹⁷⁷ House of Worth Archives. Victoria & Albert Museum, Blythe House Reading Room. London, England.

avant garde for the time period, traveling extensively abroad.¹⁷⁸ In a portrait from 1915, Mrs. Garrett is shown in a blue, white, and black dress.¹⁷⁹ The upper portion of the garment is white while the skirt is blue with a black sash, wrapped around the hips.¹⁸⁰ The dress has a high scoop neckline, with long full sleeves, and buttoned blue cuffs which nearly reach the elbow.¹⁸¹ The skirt starts below the hips (dropped waist), and is asymmetrical in tiers.¹⁸² Additionally, the garment has a matching white turban which Alice proudly displays with the bow of her head.¹⁸³ The entire dress seems to billow in small pleats, similar to the *Delphos* dresses of Mariano Fortuny's (1871-1949) which were popular throughout the teens, and were also considered avant garde along with some of the Asian inspired designs from Paul Poiret and the textiles designs of the Weiner Werkstätte (ca. 1903-1932).¹⁸⁴ The Weiner Werkstätte, started by Josef Hoffman (1870-1956) and Koloman Moser (1868-1918), created textile patterns with " ...simplified forms and vivid colours... [which] were derived from Eastern European peasant art and geometric motifs in

¹⁷⁸ Kelly, Cindy. *Léon Bakst at Evergreen House*. (Baltimore: Evergreen House, 2004), 19.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸⁴ Kyoto Costume Institute. *Fashion A History from the 18th to the 20th Century, Vol. II*. (Los Angeles: Taschen, 2007), 372-377.

contemporary painting." ¹⁸⁵ Edith Wilson did not wear cutting edge designs such as these and therefore, she maintained an image that embodied a more subtle, less experimental manner to adhere to the more conservative expectations of most Americans.

With this written, it is interesting to point out how Edith Wilson's wardrobe mimicked male attire – a rather daring innovation for the Presidential stage. Men's wear, since the early nineteenth century adhered to a somber palette consisting of mostly black. Black, according to Ethnologist Anne Varichon, "...is etched deeply in human consciousness, and it arouses universal fear." ¹⁸⁶ Thus, it is not surprising that in the thirteenth century black was adopted as the color of both Christian church and Court officials.¹⁸⁷ By the nineteenth century this powerful color took on new meanings such as grief.¹⁸⁸ Male suits, crafted from this austere powerful color were tailored and often included a shirt, jacket, and trousers. Edith embraced the late Victorian trend of wearing suits as sporting clothes (as seen in the Strolling Suit of 1896, Woodrow Wilson House Collection NT 61.17.7 (A-C)). But during her tenure as First Lady, her fondness of suits took on a new role – she was immersed in a

¹⁸⁵ Doering, Mary. Textile Class Notes. Fall 2006.

¹⁸⁶ Varichon, Anne. *Colors*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2006), 219.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

male universe where most of everyone in her immediate surroundings wore suits each day, regardless of the event or hour. Men permeated all aspects of her White House life – they were secretaries, doctors, politicians, ushers, etc. – and by blending in with her surroundings Edith commanded attention by dismissing frivolous feminine attire. Fashion historian Colin McDowell wrote in 1992; “Women wear the shapes of men’s dress because by doing so, they are psychologically assuming his power...As Polonius said, ‘The apparel oft proclaims the man,’ and the more masculine a woman’s dress seems, the less vulnerable she feels in her sexuality.”¹⁸⁹ Men, according to McDowell, do not have the ability to capitalize on their power by wearing women’s clothing because, “Male sexuality is insecure whilst woman’s is confident because for generations men have embraced the belief that their power and might are the result of their masculinity rather than their ability, aptitude or personality.”¹⁹⁰ Power was something that Edith ultimately achieved in her self-proclaimed stewardship of the presidency where she alone spoke to and received orders from a very ill Woodrow Wilson. (Woodrow Wilson suffered from a debilitating stroke on October 2, 1919. The ailment paralyzed the left side of his body thus leaving him in weak physical condition. Following advice from Wilson’s doctors, Edith created an environment where only

¹⁸⁹ McDowell, Colin. *Dressed to Kill*. (London: Hutchinson, 1992), 32.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

she and the medical staff interacted with the president to lower his stress level and aid his recovery.¹⁹¹⁾ Without the establishment of her strength and power, the men surrounding Woodrow during his presidency would have never allowed her to conduct business in such a manner. Regardless, Edith publicly displayed her powerful form of dress during the Peace Treaty talks of 1919 in Paris – she wore the “blue солдат” Worth suit to the very fashionable Longchamps Racetrack. Longchamps was the epitome of Parisian fashion – women purposefully donned their most extravagant attire in the latest styles.¹⁹² Charles and Julius Kurzman often went to the track to view current trends to report to the American public and mimic for their own financial benefit.¹⁹³ Yet, Edith chose to wear a “dowdy” suit that subsequently opened the possibility for future First Ladies to wear suits during political events – the suit also aligned her with the seriousness of the war, its devastation, and the high importance assigned to a negotiated peace.¹⁹⁴ Edith’s use of the Worth suit was so successful, that by 1921 women across America could and did purchase similar

¹⁹¹ Wilson, Edith Bolling Galt. *My Memoir*. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 288-289.

¹⁹² Boucher, Francois. *20,000 years of Fashion*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), 401.

¹⁹³ Marconi Transatlantic Wireless Telegraph, “Slim Figure Wins in Paris Mode,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 1913, <http://proquest.umi.com/login>.

¹⁹⁴ Conversation between Harold Koda, The Director of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the author, October 17, 2008.

outfits from Sears, Roebuck and Co.¹⁹⁵ In one small gesture, Edith inadvertently altered the course of the First Ladies' image.

Many subsequent First Ladies followed in Edith Wilson's practical stylistic footsteps while they conducted their official duties in the White House. However, although her style was adopted widely by the public, her style was not adopted by her immediate successors – Florence (Flossie) Mabel Kling-DeWolfe-Harding (r. 1921-1923), Grace Anna Goodhue Coolidge (r.1923-1929), and Louise (Lou) Henry Hoover (r. 1929-1933). Florence Harding and Edith detested one another. Grace Coolidge was dressed by her husband and Lou Hoover's attire was affected by the onslaught of the Great Depression. Yet, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt (r. 1933-1945) wore suits in muted colors, especially during World War II when many women wore male inspired uniforms while working for the war effort.¹⁹⁶ Elizabeth (Bess) Virginia Wallace Truman (r. 1945-1953), following in Eleanor's wake, also wore suits with trendy short-sleeve jackets in the somber male palette of, "navy blue, grey, and black."¹⁹⁷ Mamie Geneva Doud-Eisenhower (r. 1953-1961) also wore suits but in pastels.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Blum, Stella, ed. *Everyday Fashion of the Twenties As Pictured in Sears and other Catalogs*. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1981), 37.

¹⁹⁶ Anna Eleanor Roosevelt and Edith Wilson were not friendly and it is unusual that they would adopt similar styles. However, fashion in times of war (World War I and World War II) becomes somber and adopts military style or male inspired clothing. Thus, wearing suits is logical for the time period. However, unlike Edith, Eleanor's suits eschewed all elements of femininity.

¹⁹⁷ Email from First Lady Historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony to the author, July 28, 2008.

Jacqueline (Jackie) Lee Bouvier Kennedy (r. 1961-1963) who met with Edith Wilson, popularized Cassini's particular take on suits which according to First Lady Historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony mimicked the, "eye-popping monochromatic colors...of color television."¹⁹⁹ By the 1980s and 1990s suits for politically involved women like Nancy Davis Reagan (r. 1981-1989), Hillary Rodham Clinton (r. 1993-2001), Elizabeth Dole, Lynne Cheney, and Tipper Gore, were widely accepted in somber colors because they were considered professional, feminine, and comfortable.²⁰⁰ Without Edith's determined use of male inspired clothing as political garb, acceptable styles for First Ladies might be more prone to formal wear and not business attire. Edith undoubtedly was a trendsetter for both the position of First Lady and her fellow citizens.

Edith's subtle use of gender specific styles and colors which were similar to mourning attire and the drab atmosphere of the First World War, altered standards of dress for First Ladies while maintaining a sense of dignity and commonness. American women admired her devotion to Victorian standards of dress for a woman in mourning, her innate practicality of re-working her clothes, her preference for asymmetrical lines in her garments, and her understanding of popular fashion trends as seen through the eyes of Kurzman Importer and the House of Worth.

¹⁹⁸ Email from First Lady Historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony to the author, July 28, 2008.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

Through her tasteful and politically savvy eye, Edith Wilson became a trendsetter to her fellow citizens and subsequent First Ladies.

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Illustrations

Figure 1

Candid Images of William Holcombe and Sallie White Bolling

ca. 1898

Photograph

By Harrell's

Edith Bolling Wilson Collection, Box 2A NT 61.16. 575 (7)

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 2

Preparatory Design for Rooster Motif

1922-1923

Graphite, Colored Pencil or crayon

By Léon Bakst

Evergreen House Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

Figure 3

Green Plaid Jacket (Basque)

ca.1887

Silk and Cotton

Photograph by Seyoung Thomas

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.17.15 (13)

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 4

Strolling Suit

1896

Ink

By Corky Davidov

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Gift Shop

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 5

Strolling Suit Jacket Detail

1896

Wool

Photograph by Seyoung Thomas

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.17.7 (A-C)

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

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Worth Day Dress

1907

Silk and Lace

Photograph by the author

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT NN

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 8

Portrait of Edith Bolling Galt Wilson

1920

Oil on Canvas

By Seymour Stone

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.16.183

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 9

Black Net Evening Dress

ca. 1900-1910

Net and silk taffeta

Photograph by Seyoung Thomas

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.16. 2980

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 10

Black Mourning Dress

1907

Silk taffeta and net

Photograph by Seyoung Thomas

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.16. 2974 (20)

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

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Black Velvet Dress

ca. 1935-1940

Velvet

Photograph by the author

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.16. 2942

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figures 13, 14, and 15

House of Worth Suit

1919

Wool and silk

Suit by the House of Worth, Photographs by Seyoung Thomas
Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.17. 12 (A-C)
Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figures 16 & 17

Redfern Black Velvet Dress

1924

Velvet and silk

Dress by Redfern, Photographs by the author
Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.17.16
Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

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Black and Gold Gown

ca. 1930

Silk chiffon and silk crepe

Photographs by the author

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.16.2941
Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 20

Box of Fabric Scraps

n/a

Mixed mediums

Photograph by the author

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT NN
Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 21

Rizik's Black Suit

1940

Wool and silk crepe

Suit by Rizik's, Photograph by Seyoung Thomas
Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.16.2934
Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 22

Rizik's Black and Chartreuse Afternoon Dress

1940

Satin and silk crepe

Dress by Rizik's, Photograph by Seyoung Thomas

Woodrow Wilson House Museum Collection, NT 61.16.2937

Woodrow Wilson House Museum, Washington, D.C.

Figure 23

Sarah Polk's Inaugural Gown

1845

n/a

Dress by the House of Worth

James K. Polk Ancestral Home, Columbia, TN

Figure 24

Portrait of Alice Warder Garrett

1915

Watercolor and graphite

By Léon Bakst

Evergreen House Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD