

First Ladies of America



As a first lady who occupied the White House for a very short time, Ellen Wilson is not as easily remembered as history's other first ladies. Still, she made important contributions to the country in her own right, and proved that even a shy and reserved woman could take the initiative to improve the world.

Born in Savannah, Ga., Mrs. Wilson was a sensitive and refined woman with an interest in music, literature and the arts. She met young lawyer Woodrow Wilson at a church service in Rome, Ga., where her father was pastor.

Initially putting off Wilson's ardent declarations of affection, Ellen Wilson eventually agreed to marry him. Their marriage ceremony in 1885 was solemnized by her grandfather and the groom's father, both Presbyterian ministers, and the couple had three daughters, two of whom were married in the White House.

As first lady, Mrs. Wilson believed that her role was a privileged one that came with responsibility, rather than power. A professional painter, she donated her work to be auctioned for charity, but her most memorable achievement was initiating legislation to eliminate Washington, D.C.'s slums. "Ellen Wilson's bill," as it became known, was the first piece of legislation passed with such direct involvement from a first lady. Sadly, Mrs. Wilson died from a kidney disorder after less than a year and a half in the White House.

Following Mrs. Wilson's death, a grieving President Wilson was introduced to Edith Bolling Galt, an educated and financially independent widow who

had been born in Wytheville, Va. Her friendship eased the president's grief, but the public greatly disapproved of the relationship and their subsequent marriage just a year after his wife's death.

Nevertheless, the new Mrs. Wilson proved her devotion to both her husband and country during the crisis of World War I, and her efforts earned her gradual acceptance from the people.

As first lady, Mrs. Wilson was a national model for Americans as she observed rationing and other wartime restrictions. With workers in short supply, she replaced part of the White House grounds crew with grazing sheep, saving manpower and providing wool to auction for charity.

Woodrow Wilson Administration, 1913-1921

Her greatest contribution to the country, though, was her care of President Wilson after he suffered a paralytic stroke in 1919. During that time, she took charge of the president's work, screening his visitors, calls and correspondence, and making sure that his authority was not usurped.

Despite criticism that she practically assumed the role of president — including a charge by one senator who declared the country was under the control of a "petticoat government" — Mrs. Wilson always insisted that she only enabled her husband to continue his job during his recovery.

When Mrs. Wilson died in 1961, she was among the earliest first ladies to have expanded the role by making significant contributions of her own.



Ellen Axson Wilson

Born: May 15, 1860, in Savannah Ga.

Education: Home tutored; local women's college (Rome, Georgia); Art Students League, New York City

Marriage: 1885 to Thomas Woodrow Wilson

Children: Margaret Woodrow, (1886-1944); Jessie Woodrow, (1887-1933); Eleanor (Nell) Randolph, (1889-1967)

Died: Aug. 6, 1914, in Washington, D.C.

Edith Bolling Galt Wilson

Born: Oct. 15, 1872 in Wytheville, Virginia

Education: Martha Washington College, Abingdon, Virginia; The Richmond Female Seminary, Richmond, Virginia

Marriage: 1896 to Norman Galt; 1915 to Thomas Woodrow Wilson

Children: None

Died: Dec. 28, 1961, in Washington, D.C.

