

“I Think We Have An Angel in the White House”:
First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson and Her Social Activism Concerning the
Washington, D.C. Slums, 1913-1914

A Thesis submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

in the Department of History
of the College of Arts and Sciences

May 2012

Kathryn Lynnell Beasley

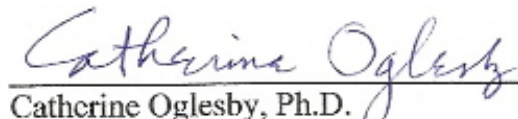
BA, Valdosta State University, 2010

© Copyright 2012 Kathryn Lynnell Beasley

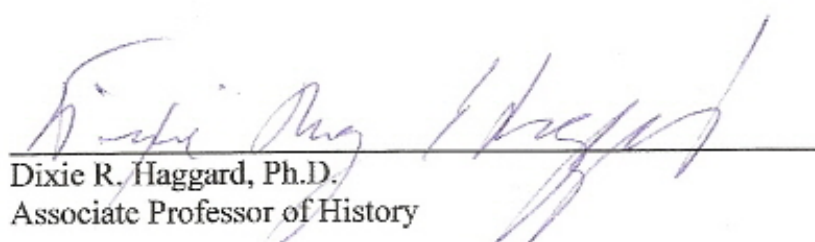
All Rights Reserved

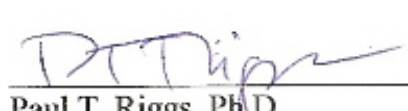
This thesis, "'I Think We Have An Angel in the White House': First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson and Her Social Activism Concerning the Washington, D.C. Slums, 1913-1914," by Kathryn Lynnell Beasley, is approved by:

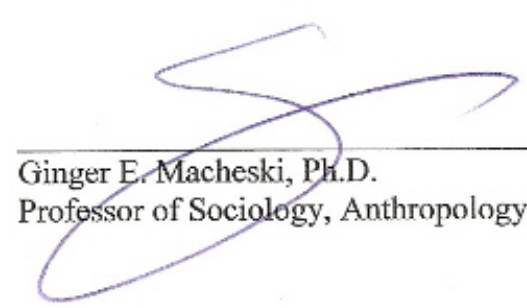
**Thesis
Chair**


Catherine Oglesby, Ph.D.
Professor of History


**Committee
Member**


Dixie R. Haggard, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History


Paul T. Riggs, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History


Ginger E. Macheski, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice

**Dean of the
Graduate School**


Alfred F. Fuciarelli, Ph.D.
Professor of Chemistry

FAIR USE

This thesis is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, revised in 1976). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgement. Use of the material for financial gain without the author's expressed written permission is not allowed.

DUPLICATION

I authorize the Head of Interlibrary Loan or the Head of Archives at the Odum Library at Valdosta State University to arrange for duplication of this thesis for educational or scholarly purposes when so requested by a library user. The duplication shall be at the user's expense.

Signature Kathryn Lynnell Beasley

I refuse permission for this thesis to be duplicated in whole or in part.

Signature _____

ABSTRACT

The First Ladies of the United States since Eleanor Roosevelt have been associated with supporting public causes, often advocating social or political issues and using their position as First Lady to become publicly involved in social causes important to them.

The First Lady role in the 1930s and 1940s was redefined with Eleanor Roosevelt, pushing the role beyond its traditional hostessing designation. However, the foundation for a socially active First Lady was laid in 1913 and 1914. Ellen Axson Wilson, first wife of Woodrow Wilson, helped in the development of the social activist First Lady by becoming publicly involved in social reform and urban renewal, directed towards the slums of Washington, D.C. Ellen began her reforming efforts within weeks of her husband's inauguration. These efforts focused on cleaning up the grim conditions in the predominately African American alley dwellings. Ellen participated in the National Civic Federation, was actively involved in the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914, and was honored with public housing bearing her name. These accomplishments help illustrate a few of the precedents that highlight Ellen's importance as First Lady of the United States.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: Scholarly and Biographical Reviews of Ellen Axson Wilson.....	5
Chapter III: “I am a great believer in the intellect, strength of character, and optimism of the American woman.”.....	26
Chapter IV: “I’ll take them through the alleys myself, for I suppose they will not refuse my invitation.”.....	56
Chapter V: “She was so quiet that I think a great many people did not realize her strength of character and force.”.....	98
Chapter VI: Conclusion	121
Bibliography	123

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my thesis advisor and major professor, Dr. Catherine Oglesby, for her guidance, assistance, and mentorship during my time at Valdosta State University. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis committee, Dr. Dixie Haggard, Dr. Paul Riggs, and Dr. Ginger Macheski, for their support and encouragement. I would especially like to thank Dr. Haggard for his guidance in helping me contribute to the historical conversation.

I could not have achieved success in graduate school without the love, encouragement, unending faith, and constant support from my family. To my mother and father, Kathy and John Beasley, thank you for being behind me 100%, for encouraging my love of history, and for the long nights of copyediting and proof reading. Thank you also to my grandparents, Riney and Nell Fulmer, for always being a source of strength and for introducing me to the First Ladies, before a trip to Virginia, when I was ten years old. And thanks to my grandparents, John and Jean Beasley, for their love and prayers. To my uncle, Hal Fulmer, my aunts, Judy Fulmer and Karen Kimsey, and my cousins, Josh Kimsey and Jonah Enfinger—thank you for the love, prayers, and laughs. (A special thank you to Hal for being my copyeditor!)

This thesis could not have been possible without the assistance of Monica McKiernan at the White House Curator's Office, Ramona Ice at Valdosta State University's Odum Library, the Interlibrary Loan Department at Odum Library, the Georgia Historical Society Library and Archives, and Teresa Williams at The Graduate School. A very special thank you goes to Sue Hammons, for her daily e-mails and constant encouragement—and for being a mentor and friend.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

On January 10, 1913, Ellen Axson Wilson, the incumbent First Lady, wrote to outgoing President William Howard Taft, “I am naturally the most unambitious of women and life in the White House has no attractions for me.”¹ This sentiment could lead some people to assume that Ellen did not accomplish much while in the White House and that Woodrow Wilson’s second wife, the more recognized Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, was a more accomplished First Lady. Ellen is usually remembered for either her artistic talents or for her untimely death eighteen months into Wilson’s presidency. However, this first First Lady from Georgia became historically significant by publicly involving herself and supporting the cleaning up of the slums of Washington, D.C. The self-proclaimed unambitious woman has a legacy that includes laying the foundation for socially active First Ladies, influencing the introduction of a Congressional bill, and inspiring improvement in public housing.

The First Ladies of the United States since Eleanor Roosevelt have been associated with supporting public causes, often advocating social or political issues. More recent First Ladies, including Lady Bird Taylor Johnson, Betty Warren Ford, Rosalynn Smith Carter, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Laura Welch Bush, and Michelle Robinson Obama,

¹ Letter to William Howard Taft from Ellen Axson Wilson, January 10, 1913, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 27, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 28.

have used their position as First Lady to support such issues as the environment, women's rights, mental health, public policies, literacy, and childhood obesity.

Eleanor Roosevelt helped to redefine the First Lady role in the 1930s and 1940s beyond its traditional hostess designation, but the foundation for a socially active First Lady was laid in 1913 and 1914. Ellen Wilson helped develop the socially activist First Lady. These efforts, which began weeks after her husband's inauguration, focused on cleaning up the unsanitary and grim conditions in the predominately African American alley dwellings.² Ellen participated in the National Civic Federation (NCF), an organization that centered first on public policies, and later social reform.³ Her active involvement in supporting and lobbying for what would become the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914 and, along with public housing, illustrates a few of the precedents that helped Ellen reinforce her historical significance as First Lady.

Historians, biographers, and others have largely ignored Ellen's influence in modifying the role of First Lady, either barely mentioning Ellen's involvement with the slums, or reducing it to a few lines. The first chapter of this thesis details the scholarly and biographical reviews of Ellen as First Lady. Ellen's first biographer, Frances Wright Saunders, discussed the slum work, but without deep analysis. One exception, though, is her most recent biographer, Kristie Miller, who states, "Through her effect on Eleanor Roosevelt, Ellen Wilson became the first in a long line of first ladies who lobbied for their favorite causes. It is not too much to say that she transformed the role of the

² The term alley dwelling was another term used in relation to slums at this time and was often used interchangeably.

³ The National Civic Federation will be referred to as the NCF from this point on.

president's wife."⁴ However, there is more to Ellen's legacy. Ellen's work with the slums, and the building of more sanitary public housing, were catalysts for transforming the office of First Lady.

Chapter 2 contextualizes Ellen historically by summarizing the historical eras through which she lived: Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era, while tracing her life up to her entry into the White House. Specifically, her time as an art student in New York during the mid 1880s, followed by her time in Princeton, New Jersey, help illustrate her lifelong interest and involvement with social work and early social causes. While in New York, Ellen taught at the African American Spring Street Mission School, and while in New Jersey she participated in similar charity movements. It is apparent that both the movements and the cultural constraints under which she lived influenced Ellen. As First Lady biographer Carl Sferrazza Anthony writes about Ellen, "her concern for those less fortunate was genuine."⁵

Chapter 3 focuses solely on Ellen's social activism while in the White House. It includes a discussion of the NCF, the history of the alley dwellings, as well as Ellen's racial consciousness, and it brings together a comprehensive picture of her work with the slums. Ellen, along with her reforming ally, Charlotte Everett Wise Hopkins, created an urban renewal and social reforming stir within Washington, D.C., leading the editors of the NCF's *The Bulletin* to write, "Mrs. Wilson's interest should be an object lesson, as to what a woman in her position can do."⁶ Ellen's death on August 6, 1914, prompted the

⁴ Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 94.

⁵ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961* (New York: Quill/William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 344.

⁶ "Annual Report—Woman's Department," *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 7.

passage of the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914, called colloquially, “Mrs. Wilson’s Bill.”⁷

However, Ellen’s death did not signal the end of her influence on the alley dwellings, nor is her legacy in social reform limited to her work there.

Ellen’s legacy, including her influence on Eleanor Roosevelt, and most critically, the under-researched public housing named for her, are the focus of the last chapter. Though First Lady for only a short time, Ellen’s time as First Lady proved to be historically important, as she went beyond the role of the traditional First Lady to become publicly involved in helping people unable to escape the wretched housing in which they lived. While Ellen’s work with the slums has been discussed briefly in biographies and other works, a deeper analysis of her involvement with the dwellings generally is ignored. Ironically, despite Ellen’s accomplishments as First Lady, it is her successor, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, who is often remembered as Woodrow Wilson’s wife, and her time in the White House overshadows Ellen’s. By focusing on Ellen’s work with the slums, and her other contributions to history, it is evident that Ellen Wilson laid the groundwork for the First Lady’s public involvement that is expected today.

⁷ Mrs. Ernest Bicknell, “The Home-Maker of the White House: Mrs. Woodrow Wilson’s Social Work in Washington,” *The Survey* 33, no. 1, (October 1914-March 1915): 22.

Chapter II

SCHOLARY AND BIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS OF ELLEN AXSON WILSON

In the past few decades, examining the area of First Ladies as a historical field through a scholarly lens, rather than just through a popular one, has slowly begun to permeate scholarly research and become a respected part of the historical conversation. Many First Ladies, such as Eleanor Roosevelt Roosevelt, Abigail Smith Adams, Dolley Todd Madison, and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, have seen their lives and roles in the White House analyzed within the scope of historical research.¹ However, there are First Ladies who do not benefit from in-depth biographies or detailed research including Letitia Christian Tyler, Abigail Powers Fillmore, and Caroline Scott Harrison. While certain First Ladies are known for their social activism, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Warren Ford, and Rosalynn Smith Carter, there are First Ladies whose roles in social reform or social activism have yet to be fully investigated.² One of these First Ladies is Ellen, first wife of President Woodrow Wilson, who is usually eclipsed in history by her successor, Edith Wilson. She falls into the category of First Ladies who

¹ These specific First Ladies have had numerous biographies written about them. Examples of these works include Blanche Wiesen Cook's *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume I, 1884-1933* (New York: Penguin Group USA, Inc., 1992); *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume II, The Defining Years, 1933-1938* (New York: Viking Press, 1999); Edith B. Gelles's *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life* (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Twayne Publishers, 1998); *Abigail and John: Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009); Catherine Allgor's *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2007); and Barbara Perry's *Jacqueline Kennedy: First Lady of the New Frontier* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 2004).

² Carl Sferrazza Anthony, "Articles about First Ladies' as Advocates," National First Ladies' Library, <http://www.firstladies.org/AdvocatesofSocialCauses.aspx>

have been the subject of some, but only limited, scholarly research. As to the subject of her social activism, very little overall has been written about her efforts and legacy with helping the occupants of the slums of Washington, D.C., or the resulting, though belated, success of her efforts.

The first biography written about Ellen, entitled *First Lady Between Two Worlds: Ellen Axson Wilson* by Frances Wright Saunders, was published in 1985; a second biography, published nearly two decades years later in 2004 by Sina Dubovoy, is entitled *Ellen A. Wilson: The Woman Who Made a President*.³ Additional literature on Ellen is confined mainly to volumes that include brief pages on all of the First Ladies. However, newer works that focus only on Ellen are emerging, highlighting the importance of her tenure as First Lady. Most scholars on Ellen have failed to explore her urban renewal work. Ellen was a Southern woman, born on the eve of the Civil War, raised in Georgia during Reconstruction, lived during the time of Jim Crow laws, and married a man well known for his racial bias. Ellen gained national attention for her efforts in cleaning up the slums and involving members of Congress in her activism.

Born in Savannah, Georgia on May 15, 1860, Ellen Louise Axson was raised as the daughter and granddaughter of Presbyterian ministers on both sides of her family.⁴ She also descended from a well-educated family. Her mother, Margaret Jane “Janie” Hoyt Axson, had been a teacher at Greensboro Female College.⁵ Ellen was “a voracious reader

³. Ellen Wilson will be referred to as “Ellen” throughout, for simplification.

⁴. Ellen’s maternal grandfather was Dr. Nathan Hoyt, her paternal grandfather was noted minister and Benjamin Morgan Palmer’s first cousin, Dr. Isaac Stockton Keith Axson, and her father was Dr. Samuel Edward Axson, all Presbyterian ministers.

⁵. At this time, she used the title of professor, which was cursory. Ellen’s paternal grandfather, I.S.K. Axson was president of Greensboro Female College for a short time, as well.

and easily excelled at English literature and composition.”⁶ She later attended Rome Female College, a secondary school located on Lumpkin Hill in Rome, Georgia.⁷ Ellen intended to study at Nashville University, but could not because her family could not afford to send her there.⁸ She became fluent in French and German, later translating research items from German into English for her husband. According to one biographer, “The Rome College course of studies included philosophy and logic, algebra and geometry” and “Ellen taught herself trigonometry over one summer.”⁹ Ellen was raised an intelligent, gentle, and surprisingly independent thinker. She later expressed modern views on male and female equality, especially in education, women working outside the home, and woman suffrage.¹⁰

Ellen was a talented artist and pursued an art career in New York and the Arts Student League after the deaths of her mother in 1881 and her father in 1884.¹¹ This passion for painting continued throughout her life; she painted and sold paintings under “E.A. Wilson” while she was First Lady, exhibited them in galleries, and was a member of several art leagues.¹² She traveled to Old Lyme, Connecticut, for four summers to

⁶ Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2010), 6.

⁷ Susan Harvey, “Ending confusion on where what is in Rome,” *Rome News-Tribune*, September 5, 1999.

⁸ Miller, 6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Legacies*, ed. Lewis L. Gould (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 342-343 and Lisa M. Burns, “Ellen A. Wilson: A Rhetorical Reassessment of a Forgotten First Lady,” in *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Molly Meijer Wertheimer, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 92-96.

¹¹ Sina Dubovoy, *Ellen A. Wilson: The Woman Who Made a President* (New York: Nova Publications, 2003), 12-16.

¹² Eighteen of her paintings were recently exhibited at the Woodrow Wilson House in Washington, D.C. between September 2010-April 2011. According to their web site, five of the paintings had never been on display previously, and four had recently been acquired by the

study at an artists' colony. She took the proceeds from the paintings she sold and donated them to Martha Berry College in Rome, Georgia, a working-woman's college.¹³ Her later work with the Washington, D.C., slums may have been directly influenced by her childhood experiences in Rome and early adult experiences in New York City.¹⁴

After a courtship that began in 1883, Ellen married Woodrow Wilson at the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia, on June 24, 1885. The ceremony was officiated by Ellen's grandfather Dr. I.S.K. Axson and Woodrow's father, Dr. Joseph Ruggles Wilson. They moved north to Pennsylvania, so Wilson could take a teaching position at Bryn Mawr and, later, Wesleyan University. They finally settled in New Jersey, where Ellen became hostess while Wilson was president of Princeton University and then, later, the state's governor. During these years, Ellen gave birth to three daughters, Margaret Woodrow Wilson, Jessie Woodrow Wilson (Sayre), and Eleanor Randolph Wilson (McAdoo).¹⁵ While at Princeton, Ellen cultivated an image that would continue into the White House—the image of the supportive wife and “helpmate.” In 1912, Wilson became the Democratic Party's nominee and won the presidency because of the split in the Republican Party between Taft and Roosevelt. Ellen was now First Lady and quickly began her social activism.¹⁶

Woodrow Wilson House.

<http://www.woodrowwilsonhouse.org/index.asp?section=news&file=news&ID=144>

¹³ Rome Female College, founded in 1845, later closed in 1890. It is often confused with Shorter College, which was founded in 1873 and Berry College, which opened as a boy's school in 1902, and Martha Berry's School for Girls in 1909, which did not become a senior college until 1932. Bobby G. McElwee, *Floyd County, Georgia* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 1998), 108-113.

¹⁴ Dubovoy, 12-16.

¹⁵ In 1886, 1887, and 1889, respectively.

¹⁶ Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 138-140.

Though Ellen was First Lady for only a short period of time, she enjoyed great popularity. Magazine profiles and articles discussing the new First Lady appeared in the most popular periodicals of the day. They discussed her background as a Southern lady and her courtship with Woodrow Wilson. *The Current Opinion* featured a puff piece on Ellen, which was also full of stereotypical images to convey her as a “true” Southerner. One issue reported, “She had the Southern woman’s love of domesticity, and from the first her duties as home-maker have come ahead of all other considerations.”¹⁷ This generalization belied Ellen’s almost immediate activism in causes that called for social reform. She campaigned for access to better working conditions for government employees, especially for 1,700 female employees in the governmental printing offices, and fought against child labor.¹⁸ Previous First Ladies had not always involved themselves personally in these particular causes. Her participation in the NCF and becoming the principal figure in improving the African American slums of Washington, D.C., were her greatest achievements. These efforts produced “Mrs. Wilson’s Bill” or “Ellen Wilson’s Bill,” which was legislation for abolishing the alleys beginning in February 1914.¹⁹

The NCF, whose woman’s department was headed by Charlotte Everett Wise Hopkins, enjoyed greater publicity because of Ellen Wilson’s involvement and support. Ellen was an active participant in the NCF beginning in March 1913, until her death in August 1914. One particular *Washington Post* article from November 1913 recounts a meeting to discuss the alleys where Hopkins stated, “The splendid help, both in persona;

¹⁷. “The New Mistress of the White House,” *Current Opinion*, March 1913, 196.

¹⁸. *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Legacies*, 348-349.

¹⁹. Frances Wright Saunders, *First Lady Between Two Worlds: Ellen Axson Wilson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 244-247.

effort and backing given by Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, has been of incalculable help...She has set a standard for wives of future Presidents which will be hard to reach.”²⁰ When Ellen first saw the alleys and slums, “she...became determined to work for congressional appropriations to provide clearance money.”²¹ With help from the NCF, of which Ellen was made an honorary chair, she organized tours for Washington, D.C.’s social elite and congressmen to walk in the alleys, so they could personally witness the devastating circumstances and conditions of the slums. There can be no question as to Ellen’s interest and unwavering public attention toward improving life in the slums. According to Cormac O’Brien, “It was in her efforts on behalf of the downtrodden that Ellen truly shined.”²²

The first scholarly work on Ellen is Frances Wright Saunders’ *First Lady Between Two Worlds: Ellen Axson Wilson*, a biography published in 1985. Saunders’ biography is the first serious treatment of Ellen, though it does not fully explore her work with the slums. In her acknowledgments, Saunders writes that her biography on Ellen was born out of a “suggestion...first made by [Arthur S.] Link and [David W.] Hirst.”²³ Saunders states that Ellen “soon recognized that a first lady had influence, which she began to use in matters important to her.”²⁴ However, there is no citation to confirm if this is what Ellen said or believed. In *First Lady Between Two Worlds*, Saunders devotes only three pages to Ellen’s involvement with the slums. Saunders recounts that it was a meeting on March 22, 1913, between Ellen and Charlotte Hopkins, that moved Ellen to tour and see

²⁰. “Helps Civic Workers,” *The Washington Post*, November 19, 1913.

²¹. Caroli, 142.

²². Cormac O’Brien, *Secret Lives of the First Ladies* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2005), 162.

²³. Saunders, xiii. Arthur S. Link is the well-known American historian and authority on Woodrow Wilson. He published 68 volumes of Wilson’s papers. David W. Hirst was a senior editor for *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*.

²⁴. *Ibid.*, 244.

the alleys with her own eyes.²⁵ When she toured, Ellen talked to the residents, shook hands with them, and walked among the dwellings, but she purposely did not tell the residents that she was the President's wife. Ellen ensured that the Washington, D.C., elite, including politicians and their wives, were aware of the alleys' existence and the plight of the tenants. Ellen made certain that the African American alleys and slums, some located only blocks from the Capitol building, stayed in the forefront of Washington, D.C.'s politicians' minds. Saunders writes that William Jennings Bryan offered public support to Ellen and that a prominent African American newspaper praised her as "one of the 'noble' women who had done work among the blacks and had established a precedent for American white women," while it denounced her husband for his segregation of governmental workers at the same time.²⁶ The publicizing of Ellen's activism in the Washington, D.C., newspapers kept a constant focus on the slums throughout the time that Ellen was First Lady. This publicizing ensured that the public would stay aware of the slums' existence and Ellen's involvement, in reforming the alleys.

In Saunders's biography, there is no mention of Ellen's activism after the initial three pages. With the exception of one brief mention of the slum clearance bill on a later page, Saunders no longer discusses the subject. Essentially, Saunders neither provides any other information on Ellen's work nor emphasizes the significance of it. Unfortunately, by doing this, Saunders creates a trend that is followed by later authors on Ellen and First Ladies: the historical importance of Ellen's public involvement and social reforming efforts with the Washington, D.C., slums is either downplayed or ignored.

²⁵. Ibid.

²⁶. Ibid., 247.

Ellen did play a traditional role in the White House, but she also chose to advocate for change on the issues that concerned her, which led to a congressional bill and the creation of housing that existed for decades in her name.

The next biography written solely on Ellen is Sina Dubovoy's 2004 biography *Ellen A. Wilson: The Woman Who Made a President*. Dubovoy builds on Saunders, but with the exception of a few other sources, does not offer any particularly riveting new information on Ellen. However, Dubovoy does offer a little more information on the work with slums, offering the perspective that, "If Ellen today is remembered at all, it is as an activist, a social crusader for the betterment of people's working and living conditions."²⁷ This contrasts with Saunders, who did not necessarily offer a perspective on Ellen or her overall historical legacy. Dubovoy compares the next Mrs. Wilson to Ellen, writing: "[Ellen] could have politely ignored [the African American slums] as did the second Mrs. Wilson, Edith Bolling Galt. Despite her five years as first lady (compared to Ellen's year and a half), tramping through slums and inspecting government facilities, day after wearying day, was not for Edith."²⁸ Dubovoy discusses Ellen's work with the NCF by framing it with a commentary by Ellen's brother, Stockton Axson. "As Stockton noted, his sister's concept of charity meant reaching out in person...and as First Lady, she could not help but reach out."²⁹

Dubovoy, though, does succeed in devoting more detail to Ellen's activist endeavors. She writes, "Ellen accomplished what no one ever had, despite the many public outcries against the slums over the years...without Ellen's vigilance, however, [the

²⁷. Dubovoy, 233.

²⁸. Ibid., 234.

²⁹. Ibid.

Alley Dwelling Act], would have died a certain death.”³⁰ Altogether, Dubovoy’s biography offers additional aspects to Ellen’s life and involvement with the Washington, D.C., slums, but it also contains Dubovoy’s criticisms about Ellen. She states, “it may not have occurred to Ellen to fraternize with any of the numerous well-educated, middle class black men who were judges, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen in the city, who might have given her a deeper understanding of the city’s problems.”³¹ These types of criticism appear to stem from evaluating Ellen’s involvement through a modern lens, and not necessarily evaluating it through a historical one. Sina Dubovoy’s *Ellen A. Wilson: The Woman Who Made a President* is significant because it is the most recent singular biography of Ellen.

In her 2010 dual biography of Ellen and Edith Wilson in *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson’s First Ladies*, Kristie Miller does a satisfactory job of conveying Ellen sympathetically, while still emphasizing her underappreciated strength. Ellen’s roles as her husband’s encourager and overall “colleague” are especially highlighted: “Woodrow...[claimed] that he could do no effective work without her presence. He also depended on her for career advice.”³² Ellen’s instinctive, almost “motherly,” nature is paralleled with Miller’s depictions of an unfaithful Woodrow Wilson. Ellen had encouraged Woodrow to take vacations to diffuse his stress, as Wilson was a high-strung individual. His relationship with Mary Allen Hulbert Peck, whom he met in Bermuda in 1907, became a source of anxiety for Ellen, though Wilson seemingly ignored Ellen’s distress, even taking Ellen to meet Peck personally. Ellen met with Wilson’s paramour and resignedly accepted the situation, blaming it on her own health and lack of liveliness.

³⁰. Ibid., 236.

³¹. Ibid., 235.

³². Miller, 22.

“Ellen knew Woodrow needed...gaiety and lightheartedness in his life to protect his health and enable him to work.”³³ However, though Ellen decided to tolerate Wilson’s affair, “she decided to pass Mary off as a family friend...she was not going to let a socialite from Bermuda jeopardize his future.”³⁴ Miller insinuates that, though this happened before Wilson’s presidency, the circumstances surrounding Wilson’s infidelities may have later spurred Ellen to maintain her active role in Wilson’s political career rather than relegating herself to the background. Miller acknowledges that Ellen’s presence on the campaign trail was the first time a future First Lady had participated. Miller uses this example to indicate Ellen’s transition from a traditional spousal role, and suggests this new role would materialize in Ellen’s work with social reform.³⁵

Miller approaches Ellen’s activism through the theme of woman suffrage. She notes, “Women, energized by the overall climate of reform, were watching closely to see what the new first lady would do.”³⁶ Miller is the first biographer to look at Ellen’s activism in more than just a few pages, discussing Ellen’s work with the slums by stating, “Ellen believed it was her duty to use her position to accomplish as much as she could.”³⁷ However, she does not believe that Ellen’s efforts in cleaning up the slums were successful, though ultimately the slums would be replaced with better housing, bearing Ellen’s name. Miller also differentiates herself from previous biographers by plainly stating, “As the wife of the head of government, Ellen Wilson was in a position to be very influential.”³⁸

³³. Ibid., 40.

³⁴. Ibid., 41.

³⁵. Ibid., 59.

³⁶. Ibid., 74.

³⁷. Ibid., 78.

³⁸. Ibid., 75.

Miller's biography stands out as the first to acknowledge Ellen's views on segregation. She writes, "While it is unlikely Ellen ever condoned complete equality between the races, there is no evidence of her actively trying to thwart the progress of African-Americans."³⁹ Miller notes that Ellen was accused of promoting segregation, despite her public advocacy of cleaning up the slums which housed both whites and African Americans. It is safe to assume that Ellen ascribed to segregationist tendencies, as did most white Americans at the time, and certainly most Southerners. However, Ellen was progressive for the era, including her views on race. Miller emphasizes that Ellen personally visited the slums and lobbied for the Alley Dwelling Bill. For a woman in her position as First Lady, this was progressive.

Though Miller does succeed in presenting Ellen in a sympathetic and practical light, her biography fails in several ways. Miller discusses, more so than previous biographers, Ellen's activism. However, the amount of pages devoted to Edith Wilson is almost twice as many as those devoted to Ellen. Miller's goal of presenting Ellen in a new light is only partially successful, and is a bit of a disappointment, given that this is the latest biography of Ellen. Miller also concludes that Ellen's involvement with the slums was not successful. This is certainly open to interpretation. Ellen's efforts in cleaning up the slums created positive and resounding changes, including, which Miller does not mention, the building of public housing.

Betty Boyd Caroli is considered a First Ladies expert, writing on the subject since 1986, though she does not hold a degree in history.⁴⁰ One of her continually updated

³⁹. Ibid., 77.

⁴⁰. According to her web site's homepage, Betty Boyd Caroli holds a Master's degree in Mass Communications and a Ph.D. in American Civilization. Her web site also states, "A Fulbright scholar to Italy, she also held fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the

works is simply entitled *First Ladies* and is a great resource for concise portraits of each First Lady, beginning with Martha Washington and ending with the current First Lady, Michelle Obama. Even though the portraits are not traditional biographies, they offer Caroli's own learned opinions on each First Lady. Caroli includes Ellen in the chapter under "The Office of First Lady."⁴¹ Caroli does not offer much in her recounting of Ellen and her efforts to improve the slums: "The First Lady's reputation for caring about the problems of black neighborhoods contrasted with the President's poor record in that area."⁴² Because Ellen's persistent promotion of slum improvement had caught the attention of Washington, D.C., Caroli writes, "nonpolitical and insecure, [Ellen] showed that even a very reticent First Lady can make a difference."⁴³

Ellen was not insecure, nor was she reticent. It is true that Ellen possessed a quiet personality by nature and, from family accounts, did suffer from some misgivings when she became First Lady. Further, it is incorrect to assume she was nonpolitical. Ellen had been involved in political life for decades; first with academic politics at Princeton and then in more traditional politics when Wilson became governor of New Jersey. Wilson credited his election as President to Ellen, stating to his brother-in-law Stockton Axson, "I don't know that I would be here in the White House at all if it had not been for Ellen

Humanities, the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute, the Hoover Presidential Library, and others. After studying in Salzburg, Austria and Perugia, Italy (but before joining the faculty at the City University of New York), she taught in Palermo and Rome, Italy."

<http://www.bettyboydcaroli.com/>.

⁴¹ Caroli organizes her book by titling her chapters, "Young Substitutes for First Ladies, (1829-1869)," "The Office of First Lady," and "The Paradoxical 1920s," for example, and discusses the time period and a brief discussion of a First Lady or hostess of the White House. Typically, the hostess was a sister or daughter, if a First Lady were unable to perform her "duties," had died, or if the President were unmarried.

⁴² Caroli, 143.

⁴³ Ibid., 145.

and the way that she has influenced the growth of my career.”⁴⁴ Caroli herself states that the Act was “the first piece of legislation to be passed with such direct and public assistance from a president’s wife.”⁴⁵ Ellen was politically involved, but not publicly, until her time as First Lady.

Caroli emphasizes the irony that Ellen was clearly concerned about the plight of African Americans, while her husband was known for his strong belief in segregation and direct alliance with promotion of white supremacist beliefs.⁴⁶ Caroli also writes that the Wilsons’ daughter, Jessie, argued that Ellen was as much in favor of segregation as her husband. Yet, this is highly debatable. Caroli’s assessment of Ellen relies heavily on the opinions of others concerning Ellen and her natural genteelness to assume a non-political personality. However, despite Caroli’s apparent contradictions in determining Ellen’s character, she is able to showcase Ellen’s commitment to slum clearance, but does not necessarily offer any new perspective on its historical importance.

Lisa M. Burns explores Ellen as First Lady in her essay “Ellen A. Wilson: A Rhetorical Reassessment of a Forgotten First Lady,” in *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*.⁴⁷ Despite some mistakes, Burns draws attention to the often-overlooked Ellen.⁴⁸ She writes, “Ellen Wilson represented

⁴⁴. Stockton Axson, *Brother Woodrow: A Memoir of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 226.

⁴⁵. Caroli, 144.

⁴⁶. Wilson has the dubious distinction of segregating the governmental offices of Washington, D.C., when the District of Columbia had integrated these offices, despite Jim Crow laws.

⁴⁷. Dr. Lisa M. Burns is a professor of Communications/Media Studies at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. She has written on the First Ladies, including a book entitled *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008.)

⁴⁸. These mistakes include: erroneously stating that Ellen was born in Rome, not Savannah (81), and that Charlotte Hopkins wrote “a grieving President Wilson” about the Ellen Wilson Memorial in June 1914. (92) Burns has the wrong date, as Ellen died in August 1914 and Wilson would not have been grieving his wife’s death in June 1914. This particular letter is in Volume 33 of *The*

the progressive political ideals of her husband...symbolizing the ‘new woman’ who was active in social reform and...pursued a career independent of her domestic duties.”⁴⁹

Burns writes in the Smithsonian Museum exhibit dedicated to the First Ladies that Ellen is vastly under represented and misrepresented.⁵⁰ Burns also notes that the Smithsonian calls Ellen’s work with the slums “misguided charity”⁵¹ which grossly circumvents involvement with the Alley Dwelling Act. Burns’ essay is very complimentary of Ellen, and attempts to explain Ellen’s involvement with slum clearance by using a rhetorical analysis, rather than a historical approach.

Burns emphasizes details that Saunders, Dubovoy, and Caroli glossed over or neglected. Referring to Caroli’s statement that Ellen was “non-political,” Burns counters with how Ellen would “read newspapers and analyze political issues,”⁵² and she would use her knowledge to help advise Wilson while helping him campaign in 1912. This would blossom into what we now see as a modern political partnership between the occupants in the White House. On the subject of woman suffrage, both Saunders and

Papers of Woodrow Wilson, (Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Charlotte Wise Hopkins, June 21, 1915. *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 432)

⁴⁹ Lisa M. Burns, “Ellen A. Wilson: A Rhetorical Reassessment of a Forgotten First Lady,” in *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Molly Meijer Wertheimer, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 98.

⁵⁰ Burns is referring to the older version of the First Ladies Exhibit, as this essay was published in 2004. See footnote below.

⁵¹ The First Ladies’ Exhibit at the National Museum of American History, which is a part of the Smithsonian Museum Complex, updated and re-opened to the public in November 2011. While I have not personally visited yet, the National Museum of American History’s web site features an “Online Exhibition” for the First Ladies. Ellen is listed under “Policy Advocate,” with no mention of her work as misguided charity. It is a mystery as to why the Smithsonian would have said that about Ellen’s work with the slums, but if they did, it is not noted on the web site.

http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=863&pagekey=909

⁵² Ibid., 85.

Dubovoy have indicated that Ellen did not believe in it.⁵³ Burns, like Miller, makes note of a *Good Housekeeping* article from 1913 where Ellen “made a public statement in favor of suffrage some seven years before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.”⁵⁴ This particular article that Burns is referencing quotes Ellen as stating about suffrage, “The arguments of my Jessie incline me to believe in the suffrage for the working women.”⁵⁵ This was not necessarily a public statement declaring her support for woman suffrage, but rather a way for Ellen to express her own views through allying with a daughter, without contradicting her husband, who did not support woman suffrage during these years.

It is still in the area of social reform and the slums where Burns separates herself from the previous writers on Ellen. She is the first to mention that Ellen apparently wrote essays to promote her work with the slums and to encourage others to get involved, as well. Sadly, Burns notes that these essays were lost and not preserved; the only reference to their existence, according to Burns, is from an obituary for Ellen in the Dublin, Georgia, newspaper, the *Courier Herald*.⁵⁶ Burns continually stresses the significance of Ellen’s work with the slums and in promoting the legislation for the Bill. However, Burns’ essay is focused on the rhetorical aspect of Ellen’s legacy as First Lady, without emphasizing its historical importance. Overall, Burns expounds in the areas in which others have previously failed. In the summation of her essay, Burns writes that Ellen’s “social reform efforts... would be remembered and mirrored by future first ladies, like Eleanor Roosevelt and Lady Bird Johnson,” and “Ellen did all of this as the first lady,

⁵³. All three Wilson daughters were in favor of woman suffrage, but Saunders stated “Ellen... did not take sides” (Saunders, 264). Dubovoy notes that Jessie was passionate about woman suffrage, but Margaret did not offer an opinion on the subject. (Dubovoy, 108)

⁵⁴. Burns, 94.

⁵⁵. Mabel Potter Daggett, “Woodrow Wilson’s Wife,” *Good Housekeeping Magazine*, March 1913, 323.

⁵⁶. Burns, 91.

but independently of her husband. Her actions on behalf of this Bill alone politicized the role of the first lady to an extent never before witnessed and seldom seen since.”⁵⁷

Because Ellen has been largely forgotten in the realm of single person study, a number of books on the First Ladies have relegated Ellen to a few pages or in a shared chapter with Edith Wilson. One example already discussed is Caroli’s *First Ladies* series. Two more examples can be seen with Bill Harris’ *The First Ladies Fact Book* and Lewis L. Gould’s *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Legacies*. In *The First Ladies Fact Book*, Ellen and Edith have been combined into one long chapter, but Harris does offer a substantial amount of information on Ellen. Ellen is discussed as a political helpmate to Wilson, instead of the advisory role in which Burns had portrayed her. In the discussion of Ellen’s activism, Harris barely offers two paragraphs on the subject; he covers her work with the slums in a two-sentence paragraph. The most descriptive sentence says, “she often led congressmen by the arm on tours of neighborhoods...and it was always the destination of her eye-opening tours.”⁵⁸

Gould’s *American First Ladies* separates his chapters on Ellen and Edith, with Gould portraying Ellen as a woman who possessed an independent nature and maintained a partnership with her husband. In discussing Ellen’s early life, Gould states, “her upbringing and studies at Rome Female College had made her an independent thinker...her father disapproved of his daughter’s tendency to be opinionated.”⁵⁹ Ellen’s independent leanings, infers Gould, were an asset. In his discussion of Ellen’s work, Gould states, “Ellen Wilson used her influence in an area unlikely to receive much

⁵⁷. Ibid., 97.

⁵⁸. Bill Harris, *The First Ladies Fact Book* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2005), 405.

⁵⁹. *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Legacies*, 342.

attention without publicity from the First Lady.”⁶⁰ However, while she “enjoyed her power to publicize issues...she did not want her efforts to conflict with those of the president” because “she understood the relationship between her stands on moral and political issues and her husband’s political image.”⁶¹ Gould uses the example of African American newspapers to illustrate Ellen’s conflict with Wilson: “When...black newspapers that had denounced the president later praised the First Lady’s work among blacks, Ellen Wilson downplayed her work.”⁶² Gould’s discussion of Ellen’s work with the slums is short, but shows an awareness of its importance. He finishes his essay by stating, “If Ellen Wilson had lived longer, the role she played with the National Civic Federation might have blossomed into other social reform initiatives.”⁶³

Ellen’s brother Stockton Axson, sister Margaret Axson Elliot, and daughter Eleanor Wilson McAdoo all wrote memoirs and remembrances of Woodrow Wilson and Ellen. However, it is interesting to note that only one of her family comments on Ellen’s work with the slums. In Stockton Axson’s book, *Brother Woodrow: A Memoir of Woodrow Wilson*, he discusses Ellen’s personality, her influence on Woodrow Wilson, how she “brought into activity his innate but previously undeveloped, perhaps unrecognized, passion for beauty in *all* art form—and in nature,” and her devotion to Wilson and her daughters.⁶⁴ He is very complimentary toward Ellen; he writes, “She was the most loyal of friends, as she was the most devoted of wives and mothers...there was sunshine in her disposition.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰. Ibid., 349.

⁶¹. Ibid., 348-350.

⁶². Ibid., 350.

⁶³. Ibid., 353.

⁶⁴. Axson, 109.

⁶⁵. Ibid., 225-26.

However, Axson omits Ellen's time in New York, her involvement with the NCF, the slums, or the legislation in Ellen's name. Instead, he writes about Ellen from the perspective of how she interacted with Wilson. Axson's memoir about Wilson, which was published in 1993 as a supplement to the *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, but written before his death in 1935, is an interesting personal account of Wilson and Ellen, albeit from a rose-colored perspective.⁶⁶ The lack of commentary about Ellen's activism is unusual, considering her brother was the author. However, this could be viewed in two different ways. First, it is possibly a reflection of the time in which he was writing, as the public work of women was not necessarily valued. Secondly, it is also possible that Axson's omission of a deeper discussion of his sister's work with the slums might stem from an effort to rehabilitate Woodrow Wilson's image.

Margaret Axson Elliott's *My Aunt Louisa and Woodrow Wilson* is another memoir whose purpose is to remember Woodrow Wilson in glowing terms, but is more focused on her own life growing up with her mother's stern older sister in Gainesville, Georgia.⁶⁷ Elliot recalls the South through "Illyria," a combination of Southern towns that reflects the rebuilding after the Civil War and the Gilded Age era. References to Ellen, or "Elly Lou" as her sister calls her, are present, but scant. Elliot mentions Wilson more frequently, recalling their interactions. She writes of meeting her niece Margaret Wilson in 1886, shortly after birth. Elliot, who was five years old, recalled, "I looked at the object of...adoration. Then I lunged forward and slapped that baby...Elly Lou burst into

⁶⁶ Axson is very sparing on criticism of Wilson, which is why the term "rose-colored" is used. The memoir is less of an honest assessment of his brother-in-law, and more of veneration of Wilson's achievements and self. For example, he writes, "There is a real kinship between the literary genius of Wordsworth and the literary genius of Woodrow Wilson." (Axson, 99)

⁶⁷ Margaret Axson Elliot was born in October 1881; Ellen was twenty-one years her senior. A month later, their mother died, leaving Ellen to raise her two younger brothers and care for her father and new sister.

tears...But [Wilson]...lifted me into his arms. ‘You mustn’t do that, Margaret... You mustn’t hurt your baby.’⁶⁸ This, Elliot recalls, ended her jealousy towards baby Margaret and, later, her two other nieces. Throughout the book, Elliot recollects her memories of all three of her siblings, especially during Ellen and Wilson’s time at Princeton. However, her book ends one chapter with Wilson’s election in 1912, and begins another on election day of November 1914. Halfway down the page, Elliot mentions, “Now Ellen was gone. She had died at the end of August, less than a month after England declared war in Germany. Now I could almost see her little, hurrying figure (she was always so afraid of missing her train!) and her beautiful, dark eyes smiling at her husband.”⁶⁹ It is interesting that the year and a half that Ellen was First Lady did not get included in Elliott’s book at all. As with Stockton Axson’s book, Ellen’s achievements as First Lady did not merit a mention or discussion in her sister’s book. Instead, both siblings focused on Woodrow Wilson.

The Woodrow Wilsons, a memoir by Ellen’s daughter Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, is a fascinating and charming account of McAdoo’s life and her parents. In recalling Ellen, McAdoo remembers her mother as “small, eager, intensely alive...we hated to see her leave the house for any reason and I always watched eagerly at a window when I knew it was time for her to be coming home.”⁷⁰ McAdoo recounts living in the White House and how Ellen persuaded McAdoo to “do something more than just amuse myself.”⁷¹

McAdoo transitions into Ellen’s work with the Washington, D.C., slums, writing,

⁶⁸. Margaret Axson Elliott, *My Aunt Louisa and Woodrow Wilson* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 37-38.

⁶⁹. *Ibid.*, 267.

⁷⁰. Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, *The Woodrow Wilsons* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 9-10. She also recalled Ellen as “[Wilson’s] faithful proofreader...they would carry on a conversation at lunch, in proof-reading style.” (*Ibid.*, 9.)

⁷¹. *Ibid.*, 235.

“Mother herself had begun, three weeks after the inauguration, to give every spare moment to an attempt to improve the wretched living conditions in the slum areas of Washington, D.C. To the casual observer, there were no slums...but hidden away in almost every quarter were narrow alleys, disgracefully filthy and over-crowded.”⁷² McAdoo’s pride over her mother’s work is obvious in her next paragraph: “She visited the alleys many times, often taking groups of Congressmen with her. She talked to the people, helped them with food and money, held numerous conferences, and insisted with her own peculiar firmness that something must be done at once.”⁷³ She finishes by stating, “In the end a bill was passed which practically eliminated the slums, and no one doubted that it was she who had brought it about...day after day she came home worn and white, but she never complained... coming down to the Red Room to receive her guests with her sweet calm smile and never-failing courtesy.”⁷⁴ McAdoo’s *The Woodrow Wilsons* is the only book written by one of Ellen’s immediate family members that discusses her work with the slums. It is rather fitting that it is her daughter who recounts, firsthand, Ellen’s dedication to improving the slums of Washington, D.C., and does so with familial pride.

Historians have largely relegated Ellen to the shadows of history. This is devastating to our understanding of First Ladies. Ellen was the initial First Lady to promote social reform, a mantle that Eleanor Roosevelt and others would soon wear. Also, Ellen broke with convention by working on behalf of the African American slums; she was a Southern white female who grew up during Reconstruction and married a man who espoused white supremacy. Ellen’s underappreciated contributions to the role of

⁷². Ibid., 235-236.

⁷³. Ibid., 236.

⁷⁴. Ibid.

First Lady are only now being brought forward to the public eye. Ellen pursued interests outside the White House, both professionally, with her career as an artist, and personally, with her passionate advocacy of improving the Washington, D.C., slums. Kristie Miller writes, “[Ellen’s] biggest impact as First Lady was her work on the Alley Bill, demonstrating that a First Lady could publicly embrace a social cause of her own choosing.”⁷⁵ This impact, combined with her efforts on behalf of the slums, would be emulated by later First Ladies, including Eleanor Roosevelt, who had been a part of one of the tours of the alleys and “took note of the legislation that resulted from the First Lady’s activism.”⁷⁶ This thesis will focus exclusively on Ellen’s work with the slums, which previous scholarship, including Miller’s recent biography, does not explore. The importance of Ellen’s legacy will be emphasized. Ellen was more than just a First Lady who served in a traditional, domestic role; instead she was the beginning of the modern, politically active, and socially involved First Ladies that we expect to occupy the White House today.

⁷⁵. Miller, 93.

⁷⁶. Ibid., 94. A discussion of Ellen’s influence on Eleanor Roosevelt is discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter III

“I AM A GREAT BELIEVER IN THE INTELLECT, STRENGTH OF CHARACTER,
AND OPTIMISM OF THE AMERICAN WOMAN.”

Ellen lived through three distinct eras—historically known as Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era—that would impact and influence her social consciousness.¹ Born in 1860, she came of age in the South during Reconstruction and the early Gilded Age, married and became Wilson’s political encourager and partner during the Gilded Age and early Progressive Era, and became First Lady during the Progressive Era. Ellen’s participation in social reform and social activism evolved as she evolved; beginning with her childhood in Rome, Georgia, living independently in New York and teaching at an African American school, navigating social responsibilities while in New Jersey, and culminating with her defining act of social activism while First Lady.

Toward the end of the Civil War with homes, farms, and crops, as well as the government and infrastructure, either decimated or collapsed, the South entered into the Era of Reconstruction (1865-1877). Racial tensions between the newly freed slaves, their former masters, and other whites became fraught with lasting violence and turmoil, including the formation and brief prominence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK or Klan). The ensuing violence, intimidation, and legal oppression would last until the Second Reconstruction, or the Civil Rights Era, nearly a century later. The rise of Radical Republicans and their governments, along with a United States Army presence in the

¹ Ellen lived during the Civil War era, but was five years old when it ended.

southern states, led to disgruntled and acrimonious feelings among Southerners toward the federal government, the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, and Ulysses S. Grant, and to those residents of the North. Reconstruction officially ended in 1877, when President Rutherford B. Hayes removed troops from the last remaining Reconstruction states, South Carolina and Louisiana, as part of the Compromise of 1877.² However, some aspects of Reconstruction lasted throughout the 1880s, especially the combination of physical, emotional, and psychological devastations among Southern citizens. To quote Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, "Reconstruction was not merely a specific time period, but the beginning of an extended historical process: the adjustment of American society to the end of slavery."³

When discussing resounding impacts or legacies of Reconstruction in the South, the hostility between whites and African Americans and between Southerners and Northerners emerged as the longest lasting.⁴ Newspapers printed during the war, including the *New York Times*, help to describe and highlight this tension;

if the South had been a community entirely composed of free men, this war would, no doubt, never have occurred...we say nothing now of the ingenuity, fertility of resource, energy, intensity, versatility, which are bred by freedom only, and which have always made great commercial countries the bitterest, most obstinate, and enduring antagonists in war.⁵

² The Compromise of 1877 was the result of Democrats in the South agreeing to stop filibustering over the contested 1876 election in exchange for Hayes removing the last set of federal troops from the South. The classic work on this subject is C. Vann Woodward's *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company, 1951; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), xxvii.

⁴ This is a condensed explanation of the Reconstruction era—this period of time is understandably detailed and nuanced and it would be difficult to recount here.

⁵ "Slavery as a War Force," *The New York Times*, December 7, 1863. From the personal collection of Kathryn Lynnell Beasley's grandfather, H.R. Fulmer, located in Tifton, Georgia.

Another article from the *New York Times* published in 1863 wrote about the Confederacy, “It is not in the power of the rebels—nor is it in the power of their foreign allies if they had them—to drive our gunboats and our troops from these lines and positions; and as long as we hold them, the establishment of a Southern Confederacy, based either on boundaries of Slavery or of nature, is an impossible achievement.”⁶ It was within this framework that Ellen grew up in Rome, Georgia, a location not unfamiliar to racial and sectional tensions.

Pastors expressed southern grievances, political rhetoric, and social commentary most fully from the pulpit. In discussing Southern preachers and evangelism after the Civil War, Hal Fulmer notes, “With the spring of 1865, the southerner found his region cast in the role of the vanquished, not of victor. Because of their fiery prewar rhetoric, this loss placed specific burdens on the clergy to explain the southern defeat. A chief task of the southern churches during Reconstruction was restoring the cognitive balance of the southern mind.”⁷ Fulmer explains that Southern Protestant churches and their clergy were expected to respond to Reconstruction, especially with, what he calls, “particular messages.”⁸ He writes, “The rhetorical challenges for the Southern churches were similar at this regional level—comfort the mourners and combat the social changes. The dominant exigence of Reconstruction was the loss of political, social, and psychological order.”⁹ This type of rhetoric, comforting and combative, became commonly heard throughout Southern congregations, including the First Presbyterian Church in Rome,

⁶ “The So-Called Southern Confederacy—Its Doom Already Sealed,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 1863. From the personal collection of Kathryn Lynnell Beasley’s grandfather, H.R. Fulmer, located in Tifton, Georgia.

⁷ Hal W. Fulmer, “The Defiant Legacy: Southern Clergy And A Rhetoric Of Redemption For The Reconstruction South” (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1985), 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

Georgia. Ellen's father, the Reverend Samuel Edward Axson, had accepted the "call to serve" and to help reestablish the First Presbyterian Church in March 1866.¹⁰ He had previously preached in Beech Island, South Carolina, and then served as a chaplain in the Confederate Army.¹¹ Reportedly, he experienced a "stress related" illness, returning home in December 1863. Afterwards, Axson preached at a Presbyterian Church and "established a school for boys and girls in their house" in Madison, Georgia.¹²

According to Ellen's biographer Frances Wright Saunders, "the call sent to Edward Axson" was "historic in its departure from protocol." She reprints the call in *First Lady Between Two Worlds*: "We have returned to our desolated homes. While trying to reconstruct our fortunes, we wish to take steps to reconstruct our church also. Will you come and help us?...These are times that we must have faith in men as well as in God."¹³ By 1880, Axson's presence and influence as pastor was so great that when approached about a pastorate in either South Carolina or Texas, the congregation in Rome, Georgia, remained adamant, "he could not leave them."¹⁴ Ellen and her family were responsible for helping others who were poor and less fortunate, and young Ellen would have realized the necessity of helping others. This help may have been another reason why Axson's congregation was unwilling to see him leave.

Comparing the South's experiences during Reconstruction with Biblical analogies

¹⁰ Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 5-6. The First Presbyterian Church was the only Presbyterian Church in Rome, Georgia, at that time.

¹¹ *U.S. Civil War Soldiers, 1861-1865*, Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System, National Park Service, <http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/index.html> Specifically, Axson was in the 1st Regiment, Georgia Infantry (Olmstead's)

¹² Miller, 5.

¹³ Frances Wright Saunders, *First Lady Between Two Worlds: Ellen Axson Wilson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

became a common method of revealing the South's discontent with post-Civil War America. Members of the Protestant clergy used their sermons as a form of social commentary. Reverend Axson's sermons reflect the dissatisfaction felt by a majority of Southerners. In a sermon from 1867, Axson preached about God's people in affliction, seemingly comparing people in the South to the Israelites; "Poor, forsaken, despised, persecuted, without rights, privilege, [or] appeal."¹⁵ The theme continues in another sermon, "The Mustard Seed," as Axson compares earthly governments to the Kingdom of God, while alluding to the situation of governments in the South. This reference is noted when he preaches, "So different from the great governments of this world—which have a proud beginning, a shameful and miserable end."¹⁶ As the years of Reconstruction deepened in the South, the political and social commentary from the pulpit became more pointed.

Within the walls of the First Presbyterian Church in Rome on a Sunday morning in 1870, Reverend Axson opened his sermon with these lines:

I suppose there is nothing more calculated to paralyze enterprise and effort in any business than an unsettled and insecure state of things in government. The reason why this must always be the case is evident, so that it is unnecessary to dwell on it. And I suppose too that we all feel that in the providence of God we have been brought to a point where a settled, established, kind, and beneficial government would be very highly appreciated. The reason for this also is so evident that it is useless even if it were proper in the pulpit to dwell on it.¹⁷

¹⁵ Reverend Samuel Edward Axson, "The Burning Bush, Ex. 3:3" sermon, month unknown 1867, Samuel Edward Axson sermons, Georgia Historical Society Library and Archives.

¹⁶ Reverend Samuel Edward Axson, "The Mustard Seed, Matt. 13:31, 32" sermon, August 1867, Samuel Edward Axson sermons, Georgia Historical Society and Archives.

¹⁷ Reverend Samuel Edward Axson, "The Unmovable Kingdom, Heb. 12:28" sermon, January 1870, Samuel Edward Axson sermons, Georgia Historical Society and Archives.

The language Axson used is typical of the time. Hal Fulmer noted, “the clerical vision of order described the chaos of Reconstruction, citing reasons for the turmoil. These explanations became attacks of Reconstruction, allowing the clergy to shift from a defense of the Old South to an aggressive assault of the status quo.”¹⁸ Disillusionment during Reconstruction was a typical emotion felt by many, and it resonated from the pulpit. In some instances, such as in Axson’s 1870 sermon, social commentary was pinpointed. In a sermon from 1874, Axson preached, “Times are very hard—perhaps none of us can remember when they were harder. Every interest languishes. Many who once had ample means and could give much can give but little now. May our King who knows all about it speedily turn again our captivity!”¹⁹

Axson’s sermons emphasize the dual nature of preachers at that time, which saw them as comforters bringing the Word of God to their congregation, while simultaneously expressing commentary on the drastic political and social changes of the Reconstruction South.²⁰ There is no doubt that Ellen heard these sermons as her father wrote and preached them; “Religion was not only a system of belief but a regimen and way of life... Weekly evening services, at least once a week, were expected of the Axson children, and most likely, daily family prayers as well, as in Ellen’s own household.”²¹

The Era of Reconstruction became known for its racial tensions and strife, including the rise of the original Klan, beginning in 1865 to the 1870s. According to

¹⁸. Fulmer, 105-106.

¹⁹. Reverend Samuel Edward Axson, “Jesus in the Treasury, Mark 12:41-45” sermon, May 10, 1874, Samuel Edward Axson sermons, Georgia Historical Society and Archives.

²⁰. However, this is not a new phenomenon. Preachers have often used the pulpit to express political opinions and social commentary throughout the centuries. During the Reconstruction era in the South, it was prevalent.

²¹. Sina Dubovoy, *Ellen A. Wilson: The Woman Who Made a President*, (New York: Nova Publications, 2004), 12-13.

Mitchell Shay, author of *Fenians, Freedmen, and Southern Whites: Race and Nationality In The Era of Reconstruction*, the Klan “adopted a military organization similar to that of the Confederate Army,” which occupied various parts of the South. In Rome, “each Klan had a captain.”²² Eric Foner writes concerning the Klan, “Georgia’s Klan was most active in a cluster of black belt and Piedmont cotton counties east and southeast of Atlanta, and in a group of white-majority counties in the northwestern part of the state.”²³

Rome, located in the northwestern part of Georgia, was no stranger to the aftermath of Reconstruction. Though Rome, Georgia, had begun the slow process of economic recovery from the devastation during the Civil War, the early years were ones of “confusion, hope, and ultimate disenfranchisement” for freed African Americans.²⁴ By the 1870s, the African American population rose sixty-four percent in Floyd County, exacerbating tensions between whites and African Americans. Jerry Desmond writes in *Georgia’s Rome: A Brief History*, the Georgia’s Freedmen’s Bureau reported “336 cases of murder or assault with the intent to commit murder against freedmen in 1868...this political intimidation occurred in Floyd County and that many prominent men of the county were members of the KKK.”²⁵ Eric Foner writes about the racial violence in the South, “violence led blacks to identify the federal government as the ultimate guarantor of their rights. Increasingly, it became clear that local and state authorities, even those elected by blacks, were either unwilling or unable to put down the Ku Klux Klan and

²² Mitchell Shay, *Fenians, Freedmen, and Southern Whites: Race and Nationality In The Era of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 67.

²³ Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, 430.

²⁴ Jerry R. Desmond, *Georgia’s Rome: A Brief History* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2008), 62.

²⁵ Ibid.

kindred organizations.”²⁶

Many African Americans also lived in dire circumstances, which were conditions that Ellen likely witnessed first hand. Ellen’s sister Margaret recounted some of these aspects in her memoir. The African American slums of these towns were described as:

The negro quarter, known as Black Bottom, was a scandal and a menace. Flooded out once a year by the spring freshets the darkeys swarmed back as soon as the water receded, packing themselves like sardines into the mouldy hovels. Epidemics of all kinds started there—diphtheria, typhoid, a motley assortment of fevers—and were carried to the white population by their cooks, housemen, and laundresses.²⁷

Diseases, such as malaria and typhoid, ran rampant in Rome, Georgia, especially among the poor, both white and African American. Diphtheria, whooping cough, and mumps also ran the gamut among the population, more than likely beginning and spreading from the slums. The Axsons and other whites employed African American servants in their homes. In addition to seeing those illnesses in both the African American and white citizens, Ellen also witnessed her mother’s severe illness in the late 1870s. While the specific sickness is not known, years later when Ellen’s daughters fell ill with diphtheria, she stated that she was “a perfect monomaniac on the subject of diphtheria.”²⁸

Considering the widespread nature of the outbreak in Rome, Georgia, in 1877, Ellen’s mother was sick with diphtheria, which could explain Ellen’s knowledge and experience with which she nursed her daughters, who contracted the disease decades later. Ellen grew up correlating disease beginning and spreading within and from the

²⁶ Eric Foner, “Rights and the Constitution in Black Life during the Civil War and Reconstruction,” *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 3, The Constitution and American Life: A Special Issue (December 1987): 881.

²⁷ Margaret Axson Elliott, *My Aunt Louisa and Woodrow Wilson* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 26.

²⁸ Dubovoy, 23.

slums, along with her family's service toward the less fortunate. Ellen would have been in close contact with the residents of the slums, more than likely tending to the sick. Because her father was the sole Presbyterian minister in Rome, Georgia, it is highly probable Ellen's family was called on to assist and aid people in need, specifically the poor and the African Americans. The interactions and violence between the white and African American citizens coupled with the living conditions of poor whites and African Americans, were more than likely witnessed by the young Ellen. Ellen's actions with the Washington, D.C., slums can be traced back to her upbringing and her internalization of the environment around her, as her later actions in life would reflect Ellen's time growing up during the era of Reconstruction.

Beginning at the end of Reconstruction, the Gilded Age is a period of American history best known for tycoons such as J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Flagler, and the Vanderbilts, monopolies, financial prosperity, Populism, and rapid urbanization. It was also the era of mass immigration, labor unions, political machines, Jim Crow laws, disenfranchisement, violence toward African Americans in the South, Victorian fashion for women, the World's Fair in Chicago, Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, American imperialism, and the Panic of 1893. For many, the Gilded Age represented a new beginning, shedding the past two decades of the Civil War and Reconstruction.²⁹ Reform in the Gilded Age was isolated, not widespread as it would become in the Progressive Era. The 1890s were a time of transition from the Anti-Reformism of the Gilded Age to the Reformism of the Progressive Era. However, this time in history would also see a rise in social activism and social reforming efforts, which would carry on into the Progressive Era. As historian Rebecca Edwards states, "In

²⁹ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search For Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 11-43.

the last half of the nineteenth century, a new United States emerged out of a crucible of fire.”³⁰

Social reform evolved into many forms during the Gilded Age, especially in rhetoric concerning reform for African Americans, labor, women’s rights, Social Darwinism, and, as the nineteenth century came to a close, the conditions of those living in slum areas. Expansion of immigration, migration, and urban centers led to the explosive growth of former moderately sized cities, such as Chicago and New York. The urbanization and industrialization of cities led to a distinct working and labor class, which became more pronounced. The areas in which these workers, along with immigrants and migrants, were living were squalid and unsanitary. In 1890, Danish-American journalist and photographer, Jacob A. Riis, published, *How the Other Half Lives*, a scathing photographic exposé on the squalor and dangerous conditions in the slums of New York City. He described with the written and visual word about the cramped and diseased conditions and the often ignored people living in the slums: “Leaving the Elevated Railroad where it dives under the Brooklyn Bridge at Franklin Square, scarce a dozen steps will take us where we wish to go. With its rash and roar echoing yet in our ears, we have turned the corner from prosperity to poverty...a dark and nameless alley, shut in by high brick walls, cheerless as the lives of those they shelter.”³¹

Riis called for the upper and middle class, those with the means to do so, to help clean up the slums, and to lobby for better housing and reform tenement housing. He states, “The gap between the classes in which it surges, unseen, unsuspected by the

³⁰. Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans In The Gilded Age, 1865-1903* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

³¹. Jacob August Riis, *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among The Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons: 1890), 28-30.

thoughtless, is widening day by day...I know of but one bridge that will carry us over safe, a bridge founded upon justice and built of human hearts.”³² Many heeded Riis’ call to help, which included monetary contributions from future First Lady Edith Carow Roosevelt.³³ Eventually slum conditions in New York City began to improve. In writing a retrospective on Riis, Edward O’Donnell recognizes Riis as breaking “new ground in his evaluation of poverty and the impoverished.”³⁴ Reformers began to emerge during the late Glided Age and would lay a foundation for the reform impulse that became the hallmark of the Progressive Era.

By 1883, Ellen’s adult life in the Glided Age began with both joy and sadness. Ellen had graduated from Rome Female College in 1876, intending to study at the Normal Department of Nashville University. However, she could not financially afford to attend. Ellen stayed at Rome Female College as a postgraduate student, worked on her skills as a painter, and studied advanced French and German. She possessed the “qualities of intellectual independence and a keen critical sense...[which] displeased her father.”³⁵ These independent opinions led Ellen to criticize a Savannah clergyman’s sermon by stating in a letter to her parents, “[he would be] a more useful and powerful preacher if he kept his literary and historical addresses in one role and his sermons another.”³⁶ There is

³². Ibid., 296.

³³. Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961* (New York: Quill/William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 312. However, Edith Roosevelt may have sent money, but she “made no tours of the tenements.” (Ibid.)

³⁴. Edward T. O’Donnell, “Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis,” *The Public Historian* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 14.

³⁵. Saunders, 18. Reverend Axson then stated that his daughter was “entirely too much inclined to have her own opinions.” (18)

³⁶. Letter from Ellen Axson to Margaret Hoyt Axson, February 2, 1878, located in the Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Reprinted in Frances Wright Saunders’ *First Lady Between Two Worlds: Ellen Axson Wilson*, 18.

no evidence of Reverend Axson's response. Throughout Ellen's life, she would maintain a "[constant probing] for deeper answers to life's riddles."³⁷

Ellen showed obvious talent as a painter. In 1878, her art instructor at Rome Female College, Helen F. Fairchild, submitted to the Paris International Exposition a collection of her students' work. As Kristie Miller recounts, "Ellen won a bronze medal in freehand drawing. International recognition earned her a statewide reputation, and she began to receive commissions to do crayon portraits based on photographs."³⁸ Ellen continued her studies and enjoyed her independence, as she and a close friend, Elizabeth "Beth" Adams, planned to one day "set up 'a hall' for unmarried women, Beth to be the manager and housekeeper, while Ellen supported the place with money made from her drawing and painting." However, this did not come to fruition, as Beth Adams soon married, and Ellen faced a tragedy.³⁹

On November 4, 1881, her beloved mother died at the age of forty-three, shortly after giving birth to Margaret. The cause was "childbed fever," which was most likely septicemia.⁴⁰ Her death left Ellen to raise her two younger brothers, Stockton and Edward, as well as her newborn sister. The death of Ellen's mother affected Ellen deeply. Years later, she wrote, "from the sun itself the glory seem to have passed away forever...I think I would give half of my life to be with her...for one short hour."⁴¹ In

³⁷. Miller, 8.

³⁸. Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 6.

³⁹. *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁰. Miller, 7. Since septicemia is blood poisoning, most women during this time contracted the childbed fever by way of the doctor or the midwife via unwashed hands.

⁴¹. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, November 17, 1883, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 2, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 532.

April 1883, Ellen happened to meet a young lawyer from Atlanta who attended Sunday morning services at her father's church.⁴²

Woodrow Wilson fit the criteria and standards for what Ellen required in a suitor, which included prerequisites she had discussed since a teenager: "splendid, delightful, intelligent, and interesting."⁴³ In addition to possessing these traits, Wilson possessed a similar background to Ellen; both grew up in the South as children of Presbyterian ministers and both were intelligent people who complemented each other.⁴⁴ According to Kristie Miller, "[Wilson] thought deeply about a few things, specifically, politics and government. Ellen read more widely and taught him to appreciate poetry, art, and the natural world."⁴⁵ Stockton Axson also reinforced Ellen's influence of the aesthetic on the scholarly Wilson by writing in his biography, "unquestionably it was Mrs. Wilson's influence which enabled him to discriminate and become so sure a judge of good painting...[she] became an eager reader of books in history, political economy, [and] political philosophy."⁴⁶ Ellen venerated Wilson throughout her life because of her love and respect for him, though she maintained differing opinions. The couple also had different temperaments; for example, Wilson complained about his various health ailments, wanting sympathy and indulgent behavior from those around him. In a letter from February 1884, for instance, Wilson wrote to Ellen, "I bethought me of a dear, loving little lady down in Georgia whom I could serve only by keeping well, and who

⁴² Anecdotal stories about when Ellen and Wilson "truly" met range from Wilson holding Ellen as a baby when he was young and also meeting as young children.

⁴³ Saunders, 4.

⁴⁴ Wilson lived in Augusta, Georgia, and Columbia, South Carolina, in his early life and young adulthood. Serendipitously, Reverend Axson and Wilson's father, Reverend Dr. Joseph Ruggles Wilson knew each other, and Axson sometimes sought advice from Reverend Wilson.

⁴⁵ Miller, 8.

⁴⁶ Stockton Axson, *Brother Woodrow: A Memoir of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 94.

would be made very unhappy if I were to get real sick...I went to see a physician, and gave him a full history of my small ailments.”⁴⁷ Ellen’s disposition was something between the stoicism of antiquity and the ‘steel magnolia’ of more recent southern popular culture. The couple began to court almost immediately, writing love letters to each other that Carl Sferrazza Anthony calls “the most ardent ever exchanged between a presidential couple.”⁴⁸ In a letter to a friend in 1884, Wilson discussed Ellen in the style of a poet: “I fell in love with her for the same reasons that had made the something [sic] easy to several other fellows who were *not* students: because of her beauty, and gentleness and intelligence; because she was irresistibly lovable. Why *she* fell in love with *me* must always remain an impenetrable mystery.”⁴⁹

In September of that year, Wilson proposed to Ellen, which “shocked Ellen into realizing she did love him...he was sure of his love and needed assurance of hers if he was to do useful work in Baltimore. That was a winning argument for a girl who admired his ambition.”⁵⁰ There is no doubt that Ellen loved Wilson deeply, but in 1883, Ellen remained unsure of marriage in general, as she still hoped for an art career. Wilson deeply loved Ellen, though he would freely admit to Ellen that he, in the words of Kristie Miller, “was susceptible to the charms of other women.”⁵¹ Wilson thrived when he was

⁴⁷ Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, February 2, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 4.

⁴⁸ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961* (New York: Quill/William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 344. An example can be found in a letter between the couple on February 12, 1884: “there’s no lover in the land who has more love to send to his sweetheart by St. Valentine than I have to my Ellie.” Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, February 10, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 19.

⁴⁹ Letter to Richard Heath Dabney from Woodrow Wilson, February 17, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 27.

⁵⁰ Miller, 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

among women, and his susceptibility would become evident later in their married life. They continued a long-distance relationship as Wilson pursued a Ph.D. in History and Political Science at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Life looked promising, but once again, Ellen's happiness would be tempered with tragedy, which ultimately became a fateful turn of events.

Reverend Axson suffered with bouts of depression, anxiety, nervous, and emotional breakdowns throughout this life.⁵² He had never recovered from the death of his wife, and by November 1883, shortly after Ellen's engagement to Wilson, Reverend Axson moved to Savannah after resigning from his church in Rome. Ellen and her youngest brother Edward moved to Savannah as well, living with her paternal grandparents, uncle, aunt, and cousins in the Independent Presbyterian Church manse.⁵³ Violent outbursts by her father led to his commitment in January 1884 to the Georgia Lunatic Asylum (now the Georgia State Mental Hospital) in Milledgeville. The Committal Register for the hospital states:

Mr. S. Edward Axson, Lunatic from Chatham Co Ga.
Native of Liberty Co Ga., Age about 47 years, Widower,
Duration of insanity about four weeks. General health has
been failing from some time. Cause supposed from bad
health. Has been always a very nervous man, easily excited.
Lost his wife a bout a year ago, which seemed to grieve
him a great deal. Slight suicidal tendency. Is disposed to be
violent occassionally. Patient is a Presbyterian preacher,
and has been for quite a number of years, a devoted
Christian. Eats well. Sleeps but little. Has been in the habit

⁵² Ellen admitted to suffering with depressives bouts occasionally through her life. Of her siblings, only her brother Stockton appeared to have inherited their father's emotional issues. (As mentioned in Saunders, Miller, and Dubovoy).

⁵³ Stockton Axson was in boarding school at the time, and sister Margaret was in Gainesville, being raised by maternal aunt Louisa Hoyt Brown. Her paternal grandparents were, as stated before, the Reverend Dr. Isaac Stockton Keith Axson and his wife, Rebecca Longstreet Randolph Axson.

of taking chloral at night. Address Rev. I. S. K. Axson,
Savannah, Ga. Received 13th Jany. 1884.⁵⁴

The reality of her father's illness affected Ellen intensely. On February 4, 1884, she wrote to Wilson about her father's commitment: "The Bible, when it tells us to 'rejoice evermore,' surely means what it says...But oh, it is hard to remember all that when I think of my dear father's 'future'! What future is there for one who, at best, *has been* the inmate of an insane asylum?"⁵⁵ It is within that same letter that Ellen appears to question the doctrine of the Presbyterian faith and how the introspection inherent in Presbyterian doctrine may have affected her father. She writes, "I believe our good Presbyterian ancestors make a mistake in insisting so strongly on the duty of *self-examination*. It is apt to become a morbid habit—to make the conscience *too* sensitive, if such a thing can be. 'Know thy-self' may be a very good motto, but there are others still better, for instance, 'forget thy self.'"⁵⁶ A few days later, Wilson replied, "My darling, don't you look forward to your dear father's future with a little much too despondency?...There seem to me to be many reasons for expecting his complete recovery...no, no my darling, don't say that there is no hope."⁵⁷

Throughout the early part of 1884, Reverend Axson's condition fluctuated. After a month at the Georgia Lunatic Asylum, Ellen reported to Wilson, "I wanted to tell you of the somewhat more cheering reports we have from Father...they were perfectly lucid,

⁵⁴ Committal Register for the Georgia Lunatic Asylum, Milledgeville, Georgia, page 199. As referenced on the online database, "Genealogy of President Woodrow Wilson" RootsWeb's WorldConnect Project, http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=woodrow_wilson&id=I0055

The Chloral referenced is Chloral hydrate, a sedative, which can cause hypnosis.

⁵⁵ Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, February 4, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, February 10, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 13.

affectionate, and almost cheerful....the doctors seem to think...he is making some progress.”⁵⁸ In March, Ellen wrote to Wilson, including a letter Reverend Axson wrote to Ellen, “I enclose another letter from Papa...because I think it indicates some improvement in his condition. It is one of the brightest letters we have received from him. He seems to dwell less on himself and to take more interest in other things which is a great point gained.”⁵⁹ It would not be until May that news of Reverend Axson’s decline would appear in her letters to Wilson: “I have not written about Papa because, as you supposed, I had nothing good to tell. We have had no letters from him since those you saw. We hear but little from the doctors—they have always been very reticent in giving us—in Sav.—an opinion; we only knew he had been much worse for a time.” She continued on in the same letter stating, “The symptoms are bad, and they can give little or no hope of his ever recovering.”⁶⁰

Reverend Axson did not recover. On May 28, 1884, he died at the age of forty-six in the Asylum in Milledgeville, most likely from suicide.⁶¹ Eleanor, Ellen’s daughter, later wrote in reference to his death, “eventually and literally, my grandfather died of a broken heart.”⁶² On June 1, Wilson responded to the news, as Ellen had a family member inform him of the death. He wrote from Wilmington, North Carolina, “for surely it was a

⁵⁸. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, February 18, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 31.

⁵⁹. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, March 10, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 75.

⁶⁰. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, May 13, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 176.

⁶¹. According to France Wright Saunders, a letter from Ellen’s third cousin, Reverend Benjamin Morgan Palmer, raises the suspicion of Reverend Axson’s suicide. He mentions in his condolence letter, “The place and manner of your father’s death are inexpressibly sad.” Saunders, 44. Many at the time did not believe a suicide could be “saved” in the next life.

⁶². Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, *The Woodrow Wilsons* (New York: The MacMillian Company, 1937), 39.

blessed, gracious release from the sorrows and terrors of his conditions; but for you, and for Stockton and Eddie... Try to bear up, my darling. Remember how many there are left who love you and to whom your love is all in all. Your dear father, however sad or tragic his death may have been, is happy now.”⁶³ Ellen wrote to Wilson the next day, the letters crossing in the mail, stating “God has been very merciful to him. He *has* ‘been pleased to deliver him.’ He has ‘made haste to help him.’ Yet I don’t know that it made it much easier for me.... Oh my dear, dear father... what an end to such a life!”⁶⁴

The death of Reverend Axson held an unexpected opportunity for Ellen. When his estate was settled, the sum of the stocks, bonds, real estate, and life insurance policy totaled \$12,000. This enabled Stockton Axson to attend college and Ellen to attend art school at the Art Students League in New York.⁶⁵ In the letters between Ellen and Wilson, she wrote about a possible career, which would further postpone the date of their marriage. “Why, Sir, I also am bestirring myself to obtain a *professor-ship* (ahem) and with prospect of success. I wish to teach drawing and painting in a school. I think I can make more at that than at the crayon portraits,—at any rate it is more to be depended upon,—and then I can do the portraits too, ‘after hours.’”⁶⁶ Wilson, who believed that Ellen would marry him sooner, responded, “I must say, my little sweetheart, that the hint you give of your own plans frightens me... the sooner I can relieve you of the necessity of

⁶³. Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, June 1, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 200.

⁶⁴. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, June 2, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 201.

⁶⁵. The Art Students League, founded in 1875, is still in existence today, located at its 1892 location on West 57th Street in New York City. <http://www.theartstudentsleague.org/> Ellen attended the Art Students League when its location was a collection of studio and rooms, located on West 14th Street in Manhattan.

⁶⁶. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, May 6, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 162.

thinking such things as a teacher's position the happier will I be."⁶⁷ He tried to convince Ellen that she did not need employment, that she should focus on the upcoming marriage, and worried that she would be "beyond his reach."⁶⁸

Before Ellen's father died, she hinted in her letters to Wilson that she might seek a position teaching in Rome, North Carolina, or New York. Ellen became slightly irritated at Wilson, who urged her not to make a decision until she consulted him. "If I take these steps, and anything comes of it, things *will* be 'decided' you see for a year. But I *must* take them at once, because for the sake of others, you know, it would'nt be right for me to let things drift."⁶⁹ The inheritance left by her father allowed Ellen to become a student of art in New York, rather than a teacher, much to Wilson's chagrin. In July 1884, Ellen wrote to Wilson that, "Yes, I suppose I will be going to New York now, beyond a per-adventure...the fall session at the [Art Student's] *League* (not *Cooper's*—I would'nt care to go *there*) begins the first Monday in Oct...I am so tempted and tantalized by the thought of it."⁷⁰

Ellen's desire to pursue art and live independently began in October 1884. She roomed with other female students in accommodations which Wilson called in a letter to Ellen shortly after his departure from New York, "dreary quarters amidst horrid people"—until she moved a few days after arriving in New York to a boardinghouse on

⁶⁷ Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow, May 8, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 166-167.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁹ Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, May 9, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 171.

⁷⁰ Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, July 7, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 235. Later, Wilson admitted in another letter that Ellen needed to explain about the Art Students League—he had never heard of it.

West Eleventh Street.⁷¹ Ellen loved her new life. The tone of her letters to Wilson exuded excitement, anticipation, and a slight exhilaration at being a young, Southern woman in New York City. She wrote of her love for him, but also included anecdotes about her art, the type of materials and mediums used, her friends, and her work. For example, shortly after arriving, Ellen informed Wilson about a Republican demonstration near the boarding house, “We have been very much entertained by the novel sight...especially as the cheering was quite as loud for Grover Cleveland as for ‘Jim Blaine’! We girls have a great deal of fun over our political differences,—Florence [Young] being a hopeless Republican. That is one respect in which I believe we excel most of you men.”⁷²

Wilson remained in Baltimore, worrying about Ellen’s health, the character of her roommates, traveling unescorted around the city, and potential male attention toward his fiancée. In return, he received letters from Ellen about the progress of her painting, attending the theater, visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and failed trips to buy whiskey that was to be used as a cold remedy.⁷³ Wilson wrote of his worry to Ellen that he was “constantly haunted by the thought that you sit all day at your easel, doing all that

⁷¹ Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, October 4, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 330. However, Ellen was not alone in New York. Two female friends from Rome, Georgia, Annie Lester and Florence Young were also at the Art Students League, and a cousin from her maternal grandmother’s side lived in New York City, as well. On the subject of this cousin, Ellen wrote, “I believe I like them better when I don’t stay with them.” (Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, October 5, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 333.)

⁷² Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, October 6, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 336.

⁷³ As mentioned in a letter from October 11, 1884. Wilson had his own anecdotes to impart, especially about studying Colonial history: “Altogether, it’s a sort of study, first of all, of what might be called *pre-historic* America. But I need not bore *you* about all this. I am sufficiently bored for both of us.” (Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, October 28, 1884, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 3, 379.) Also, his suspicions were correct; a young salesman with Houghton, Mifflin, & Company, Arthur Goodrich, tried to court Ellen.

it is possible to do to drive the bloom out of your cheeks and to bring dark lines under your eyes.”⁷⁴

In January 1885, Ellen began working as a teacher at the Spring Street Mission School, a city mission for African American children, located over a barroom in one of the lesser desirable areas of New York City. It is easy to assume that Ellen might have witnessed or known of the slums of New York, as Riis would publish his book five years later, and she would have been affected by the conditions of slum life. It is also important to note that the location of the Art Students League was on West Fourteenth Street. According to author Sean Cashman, “Conditions were particularly bad in the Lower East Side, that section of Manhattan east of Third Avenue and south of Fourteenth Street.”⁷⁵ Ellen’s interest in helping others had been prevalent since her childhood, but the circumstances of her teaching, volunteering, and involvement in an African American school is intriguing because of its circumstances. However, because social reforming efforts during the Gilded Age were minimal, Ellen’s involvement, interest in, and insistence on reform are all the more significant. This involvement can be traced to the Spring Street Mission School. On February 8, 1885, Ellen wrote to Wilson,

I am going at two o’clock away down to Spring St. to take a class in the mission school there...I did not think work of that sort amounted to much unless you could follow the children up in their homes, and I was as yet too much of a stranger to the city to attempt that; my family would not consent, it was about as much as they could ‘stand,’ to have me finding my way alone about the *avenues*!...But they needed *teachers* very much. So I have decided to go; am very glad for the opportunity, for I feel that I am leading a

⁷⁴. Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, April 12, 1885, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 477.

⁷⁵. Sean Dennis Cashman, *America In The Glided Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 121.

very selfish life here, doing only my *own* work all day long;—not even looking for my share of God’s work.⁷⁶

Later that day, Ellen wrote Woodrow another letter after visiting the Spring Street Mission School. Using adjectives common for the day, she described the school and the children, “it is situated over a *bar-room*. I was rather pleased with my first experience of a city mission. It is a big room-full of noisy bright very clean and respectable looking little darkies.” Then with a surprising, ‘oh, by the way’ confession, she added, “did I tell you it was a coloured school?”⁷⁷

Wilson responded the next day, unhappy and a little sarcastic with Ellen’s new-found employment:

It will not add to my peace of mind on Sabbaths to know that you have undertaken missionary labours on Spring St. I have no disposition to interfere in the least with your discretion in such matters: you must of course decide for yourself what your duty may be with reference to work like that; but I cannot see that you were under any moral obligations to take part in the school of which you speak. One who is not a New Yorker must be entirely inexperienced in the ways of approaching the gamins of a city missionary school, and must be exposed to risks in the work to which city-wise and city-hardened persons would not be subject. I trust that my darling may be protected from these and that she may derive satisfaction from her new work as great as her motives are pure in undertaking it: but I have my misgivings. I entirely sympathize with and admire your feelings in the matters, but I cannot help questioning the wisdom of the arrangement.⁷⁸

Ellen would not be dissuaded, writing back to Wilson that, “Even if there were some little risk or unpleasantness connected with it, it don’t seem quite right to think first and

⁷⁶. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, February 8, 1885, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, 224-225. Ellen worked at the Spring Street Mission School from January to May.

⁷⁷. Ibid.

⁷⁸. Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, February 9, 1885, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, 227.

altogether of *that*, letting it keep us from even *trying* to do anything... I must do what I can—especially as they *need* teachers badly, so that I am not taking the place of others who could be more useful.”⁷⁹ At this juncture, Wilson refrained from arguing further, as he realized Ellen would not be convinced to abandon her work at the mission school. His concern sprang from the realization that their marriage might be delayed further, which had been scheduled for June 1885, because of her art studies and mission school responsibilities.⁸⁰ Her letters to Wilson spoke very little of Spring Street Mission School after this initial exchange, signaling a possible desire on Ellen’s part to not argue or debate further about reconsideration. Wilson would occasionally write, always in reference to her health, about giving up various aspects of her activities, no doubt alluding to the Spring Street Mission School. Ellen also assured Wilson that she did not intend to pursue art and painting as a steady career, as he had hinted to his worry of a marriage as sacrifice for her. Ellen responded to his concerns by stating, “My experience and observation since I have been here have driven me to the conclusion that I *have* talent, above the average art-students... I worked partly to gain a means of support and chiefly for the pure love of the work for it’s own I believe.”⁸¹

⁷⁹. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, February 10, 1885, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, 233-234.

⁸⁰. For Ellen’s part, she continued to encourage him about his doctoral studies, potential employment for him, about his book, her love for him, and overall concern for his general well-being. Wilson sent letters of the same, containing sentiments such as, “a woman proves her womanliness, a man his manliness, by longing for the companionship of marriage, and for all the duties and responsibilities that marriage brings.” (Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, March 1, 1885, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, 316.) It is obvious Ellen wanted to marry Wilson and make a life with him; her letters are filled with missives of love, affection, and adoring language, but her work with various social reforming ventures, for example, also stayed a part of her life.

⁸¹. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, March 28, 1885, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, 429.

Essentially, Ellen stated that she would always paint, but a career as an artist was out of the question. To be Woodrow Wilson's wife became Ellen's desire for the future; "You *must* know how much more eagerly I have longed to be your wife...you must see that you are indeed all the world to me."⁸² Ellen had recognized Wilson's potential and future in life, and she was determined to help him fulfill the ambitions. On May 29, 1885, Ellen left New York, the Art Students League, and Spring Street Mission School, on a steamer for Savannah, ready to complete the final preparations for her wedding. Her time in New York, Carl Sferrazza Anthony writes, made Ellen "a bohemian...she taught black children in a mission over a saloon, and...went to hear the 'sinful' Henry Ward Beecher preach. In school, she sketched nude models. She subscribed to *The Nation*...attended lectures unescorted."⁸³ The influence of her time in New York, both personally and with her work with the Spring Street Mission School, would stay with Ellen, even in the White House.

Ellen's time in art school in New York is not unusual for a young woman from the South at that time. Over a thousand white Southern women attended schools in the North, usually attending what are called the "Seven Sister Colleges."⁸⁴ While Ellen did not attend a traditional Northern college, the Southern women who did were exposed to differing values and an independent life that they could not necessarily lead in the South. Ellen's time in New York reflects this mindset of Southern women internalizing new ideas and taking these ideas home with them, which became widespread during the Progressive Era. Another aspect of what Ellen and these Southern women in the North

⁸². Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson, April 16, 1885, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, 493.

⁸³. Anthony, 301.

⁸⁴. These colleges include: Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Barnard.

had in common is seen with regard to social reform. According to woman's historian Joan Marie Johnson, "northern-educated women...found fulfillment in one or more of the many new women's associations and reform interests popular during the Progressive Era. These women—whether or not they married or worked for wages—were activists."⁸⁵ Southern women, after returning home, became involved in clubs, suffrage activities, humanitarian work, and social reform. Johnson writes,

Progressive professors at northern colleges introduced students to poverty and social issues on a theoretical level in the classroom as well as showed them what they could do about such problems in settlement houses and other social welfare associations. Exposure to poverty in the North—whether through Jacob Riis's photographs or at a settlement house in the city—opened their eyes to poverty and the needs of many in the South.⁸⁶

However, when it came to race, Southern women still held to white supremacist attitudes, with some refusing to take the same class as or sit in the dining hall with an African American, stemming either from their own mindset or worries over their families finding out. Some Southern women did advocate civil rights and equality, such as Virginia Foster Durr and Lillian Wyckoff Johnson, which directly resulted from their time spent in the North.⁸⁷ Ellen's time in New York, combined with her time spent exclusively in the North beginning in 1885, puts Ellen firmly in this historical context of the changing attitudes of Southern women, especially Southern women who went North.

⁸⁵. Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges: Feminist Values and Social Activism, 1875-1915* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 143. Pioneering women's historian Anne Firor Scott describes the start of the Southern social activist and reforming woman, but in the South, rather than the North in her book, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1970).

⁸⁶. *Ibid.*, 145.

⁸⁷. *Ibid.*, 95-108.

For Ellen, her work with social reform was put on hold for marriage. On June 26, 1885, the *Atlanta Constitution*, reprinted from the *Savannah Morning News*:

Miss Ellie Lou Axson, daughter of the late Rev. Edward Axson, of this city, and Mr. Wilson, son of Rev. J.R. Wilson, of Wilmington, N.C., were married last evening [June 24] at the residence of Rev. Dr. I.S.K. Axson, pastor of the Independent Presbyterian Church. The ceremony was performed by the groom's father and bride's grandfather. The nuptials were celebrated quietly, only the immediate friends and relatives of the contracting parties being present.⁸⁸

Ellen and Wilson married in the parlor of her grandparent's home, the manse. Frances Wright Saunders mentions that Ellen's nine-year old brother Eddie was involved in a "vigorous fistfight" with Wilson's nephew, Wilson Howe. Apparently, the boys disagreed, which Wilson found amusing, and Ellen found appalling.⁸⁹ After a honeymoon trip to Arden, North Carolina, with other side trips along the way, the new Mrs. Woodrow Wilson settled in at Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, where Wilson had been appointed to teach at Bryn Mawr College. Soon, Ellen became pregnant, and she traveled home to Georgia for the birth. On April 16, 1886, Ellen gave birth to Margaret Woodrow Wilson in Gainesville. Two more daughters would follow, Jessie Woodrow Wilson, also born in Gainesville, Georgia, on August 28, 1887, and Eleanor Randolph Wilson, born in Middletown, Connecticut, on October 16, 1889.⁹⁰

Ellen's last pregnancy and birth caused her to become quite sick, including bad headaches, troubled vision, and problems with developing kidney disease. Unfortunately,

⁸⁸. "Marriage in Savannah," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 26, 1885.

⁸⁹. Saunders, 62.

⁹⁰. According to Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, Wilson's father, Reverend Joseph R. Wilson, characteristically regretted that Ellen and Wilson did not have a son. Saunders writes, "When told she had another daughter, Ellen wept. Woodrow's father sent congratulations and invoked God's blessing even as he confessed that he had unreasonably hoped for a boy" (80)

despite Ellen's symptoms, doctors told Ellen there was no reason to worry, even though the presence of albumin in a urine sample indicated kidney disease.⁹¹ Ellen would die in 1914 of Bright's Disease, or what is known now as nephritis.⁹² What can be determined, however, is that Ellen's problems with kidney disease began with her last pregnancy.

The Wilsons moved to Princeton, New Jersey, in September 1890, where Wilson had accepted a position as Chair of Political Economy and Jurisprudence at Princeton University. He would later become President of Princeton in 1902. While in New Jersey, Ellen maintained a full household, home schooled her daughters, oversaw the building of their home, economized so Wilson could afford trips to Bermuda and Europe, supported and helped Wilson, traveled, and participated in social and charity works.⁹³ Eleanor Wilson McAdoo remembered a childhood filled with love and affection, as it is evident that the family was extremely close-knit. While she did not pursue social reform work as she had in New York, Ellen began working with the Women's Employment Provident Charity, or as she called it, the "employment society," a woman's charity organization in Princeton around in 1894.⁹⁴ Princeton, as did New York, had its own slums—nicknamed

⁹¹ Letter to Ellen Axson Wilson from Woodrow Wilson, September 2, 1889, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 6, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 375.

⁹² It is also possible that aspects of preeclampsia, or toxemia, may have played a role in Ellen's problems during her pregnancy and her development of kidney disease. The symptoms Ellen discussed in her letters align with those of preeclampsia. These symptoms include severe headaches, but the effects of preeclampsia last after a baby's birth, and can lead to kidney disease and renal failure. <http://www.webmd.com/baby/tc/preeclampsia-and-high-blood-pressure-during-pregnancy-symptoms>

⁹³ Family members included Ellen's sister Margaret Axson, brother Edward Axson (who, along with his wife and young son, would die from drowning in 1905). Also, some women in Princeton made fun of Ellen for wearing the same brown dress for years and not wearing jewelry. Ellen brushed off these criticisms, as she did not think it necessary to spend the finances on herself. Later, when Wilson was elected President, Ellen bought her three daughters two pearl necklaces and diamond pin for the inauguration. When he discovered she did not buy herself any jewelry, Wilson bought Ellen a diamond pendant. (McAdoo, 198)

⁹⁴ Records of the type of work Ellen might have done have been lost.

“African Lane”—with immigrants from Europe crowding into the town.⁹⁵ The employment society helped African American women, poor women of all races, and immigrant women find employment. Her letters between 1895 and 1896 frequently mention her presence at the employment society, but not the type of work she did there, indicating an ongoing interest in social reform and sensitivity to racial issues uncharacteristic of a white woman from her time and place. She did not fall into a lackadaisical life, as did a majority of upper to middle class women with leisure time. Instead, until Wilson became the Democratic Party nominee for President in 1912, Ellen filled her time with social calls, art, community activities, such as the Princeton Ladies Auxiliary, caring for her daughters and teaching them at home, and trips to Old Lyme, Connecticut, to enhance her artistic skills. In 1902, Wilson became President of Princeton, and in 1910, he became Governor of New Jersey.

The Wilson’s apparently strong, loving marriage was not without its challenges, chief of which was an emotional affair Wilson had with Mary Peck. This strained the relationship between Ellen and Wilson. Wilson met Peck while vacationing by himself in Bermuda in 1907. They maintained contact through letters, and, by 1908, he wrote her letters reminiscent of the ones he wrote to Ellen in the 1880s. The relationship, while apparently never a physical affair, was certainly an emotional one. Ellen was aware of her husband’s growing affection toward Peck, as Wilson had told Ellen of it in letters and in person, and Ellen apparently issued Wilson “astute warnings,” as it hurt her deeply.⁹⁶ Ellen met Peck at Wilson’s request, and continued to tolerate the ongoing letters between the two of them. The reasoning for this tolerance is not known, especially as Wilson

⁹⁵. Dubovoy, 101.

⁹⁶. Saunders, 187-188.

continued to see his “relationship with Mary intensif[y].”⁹⁷ Ellen claimed Peck as a family friend, when asked. It is possible, as Kristie Miller assumes, Ellen tried to “neutralize the other’s woman’s effect on Woodrow’s political career.”⁹⁸ It was also at this time Ellen threw herself further into her art, making it more a priority in her life. She also helped propel Wilson in his political career as an active participant and supporter, helping him campaign and making necessary social calls. Wilson later credited Ellen with putting him in the White House.⁹⁹

In 1912, Ellen became the First Lady of the United States. The election of 1912 had been a greatly divided affair, as Republican incumbent William Howard Taft and former president and head of the Bull Moose Party, Theodore Roosevelt, essentially split the Republican vote, allowing Wilson to claim the majority for the Democratic Party.¹⁰⁰ Ellen and Wilson entered the White House in the middle of the Progressive Era, which would end with the outbreak of World War I a few years later. The Progressive movement has been defined as “not one nationally organized campaign but rather an aggregation of many movements for social, economic, and political reform”¹⁰¹ and as a “radical movement...the progressive agenda was so often carried out in settlement houses, churches, and schoolroom, in unassuming day-to-day activities.”¹⁰² The reforms of the Progressive Era, along with reforming organizations and individuals, saw greater

⁹⁷. Miller, 40.

⁹⁸. Ibid., 46.

⁹⁹. See Chapter 1, page 12.

¹⁰⁰. This is a condensed version of the election of 1912. For a more in depth discussion, refer to Lewis L. Gould’s *Four Hats in the Rings: The 1912 Election and the Birth of Modern American Politics*. (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 2008).

¹⁰¹. Vincent P. DeSantis, *The Shaping of Modern America: 1877-1920*, 2nd ed. (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Forum Press, Inc., 1989), 149.

¹⁰². Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), xv.

success in achieving their intended objectives. Examples of these objectives include woman suffrage, urban reform, prohibition, political reform, and economic reform. A prominent organization during the Progressive Era was the NCF. The head of its women's department, Charlotte Hopkins, paid a visit to Ellen on March 22, two weeks after the March 4, 1913, inauguration. This visit was not a social call, but a call for help from Hopkins about the living conditions in the Washington, D.C., slums.

The three eras that Ellen lived through—Reconstruction, Gilded Age, and Progressive—all influenced and shaped her social consciousness. Her participation in the Washington, D.C., slums was not a sudden event or occurrence, but an act of social reform that had been a part of a pattern first set in New York. She grew up in the South during an era of sectional and racial antagonism, but did not succumb to the divisive feelings of the day. As she approached adulthood, her social awareness began to expand, as exemplified with her time teaching at the Spring Street Mission School in New York, and continuing with various organizations at Princeton. What makes this even more unusual, given the anti-reform nature of the region from which she came, is that she frequently worked on behalf of African Americans. When Ellen met with Charlotte Hopkins in the White House in March 1913, it would not be a matter of *if* Ellen would help, but *how*.

Chapter IV

“I’LL TAKE THEM THROUGH THE ALLEYS MYSELF, FOR I SUPPOSE THEY WILL NOT REFUSE MY INVITATION.”

In November 1914, Charlotte Hopkins wrote an editorial in *The Bulletin*, the NCF’s publication, in remembrance of Ellen, who had died that August. She wrote,

My personal acquaintance with her began soon after her arrival at the White House, and as Chairman of the District of Columbia Section of the Women’s Department of the National Civic Federation, I invited her to attend a lecture given for the members by the head of the Washington Poor House. She accepted and came, showed the deepest interest, asked the most intelligent questions, and at the conclusion said she would like to belong to the Women’s Department as an honorary member, privileged to work whenever she had leisure to do so; the members were then introduced to her. From this time her interest in the work of the Federation was constant. She sent for me the next day to come and see her. . . Mrs. Wilson asked me to explain to her all the various charities and philanthropies in the District of Columbia, and tell her what had been done by former Presidents and their wives and arrange to show her the various institutions. She made notes and before I left decided on a date to inspect the alleys and Settlement Houses.¹

Beginning in the latter part of March 1913, after meeting with Charlotte Hopkins, Ellen initiated her involvement with the alley dwellings of Washington, D.C. What began with a desire to help those living in wretched conditions developed into the significant component of Ellen’s legacy. As First Lady, Ellen became the first to champion publicly

¹ Charlotte Hopkins, “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson,” *The Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (November 1914): 2.

the issue of urban renewal, to become publicly involved in social reform, to publicly pursue legislation to clean up the alleys, and, most importantly, to have public housing later constructed. From March 1913 to August 6, 1914, the First Lady immersed herself in helping the residents of the alleys, doing away with the unsanitary houses, and laying the foundation for promoting social causes, activities usually associated with First Ladies today. A deeper look into Ellen's work with the slums is necessary to understand her importance as First Lady. Ultimately, her decision to partner with the NCF and actively seek better living conditions in the alley dwellings became a significant one, serving as her most enduring legacy. Today, First Ladies can publicly advocate for personal causes, and often see results from their involvement, which is a concept that can be traced to Ellen. The alley dwellings and social reform are the mode by which Ellen began altering the public role of First Lady. Most importantly, Ellen's association with the slums continued beyond her death, as evident by the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914 and public housing that exists in Washington, D.C., today.

To understand the importance of Ellen's involvement with the slums, it is necessary to know why the alley dwellings were at the center of social activism. At this time in Washington, D.C., these dwellings essentially had been slums since the 1870s. The alleys began as 1850s housing to compensate for overpopulation. They soon became the "hidden community" of the Washington, D.C., area.² Whites, including Irish workers and, after 1865, disabled Civil War veterans, originally inhabited the alley houses: "In 1858...the alleys were highly segregated. Of the forty-nine alleys, twenty-one were all

². James Borchert, "The Rise and Fall of Washington's Inhabited Alleys: 1852-1972." Records of the Columbia History Society, Washington, D.C. 71/72 (1971/1972): 268; Elizabeth Hannold, "'Comfort and Respectability': Washington's Philanthropic Housing Movement," *Washington History* 4, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1992/1993): 20-39.

white, seventeen all black and only nine less than a two-thirds majority of one race.”³ By 1871, African Americans had become the (segregated) majority among 1,500 households. Parts of the slums were given nicknames, such as “Foggy Bottom,” “Willow Tree Alley,” “Snow’s Alley,” “Goat Alley,” “Logan’s Court,” and suggestively, “Murder’s Bay.” The housing included tenant houses, with negligent landlords, while the tenants suffered from high death rates because of disease. Construction of alley housing had been ongoing until 1892, when a Congressional ban on such construction was enacted.⁴ Many Washington residents turned a blind eye to the conditions in the alleys, despite efforts beginning in 1894, when, James Borchert writes, “reform-minded citizen groups began actively propagandizing for the abolition of all alley housing.”⁵

In 1912, Grace Vawter Bicknell, the Chair of the Committee on Housing for the Woman’s Welfare Department of the NCF, wrote an essay on the alleys of Washington, D.C. In it, she describes the conditions that were ignored, but which Ellen would soon witness: “In the alleys, vice rears its head unashamed and crime boldly flaunts itself. And many of the 16,000 persons who inhabit the alleys, passing daily back and forth between their homes and yours, weave an inseparable bond which threaten [sic] the welfare of the entire community.”⁶ President Theodore Roosevelt, possibly influenced by Jacob Riis’ eye-opening *How The Other Half Lives*, noted to Congress in 1902 that attention to the alleys was necessary.

The slum exacts a heavy total of death from those who dwell therein; and this is the case not merely in the great crowded buildings in New York and Chicago, but in the

³. Ibid., 272.

⁴. Ibid., 267-281.

⁵. Ibid., 279.

⁶. Grace Vawter Bicknell, *The Inhabited Alleys of Washington, D.C.* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Housing, Woman’s Welfare Department, National Civic Federation, 1912), 3.

alley slums of Washington...no Christian and civilized community can afford to show a happy-go-lucky lack of concern for the youth of to-day. For, if so, the community will have to pay a terrible penalty of financial burden and social degradation to-morrow.⁷

Despite the vocalized pleas, a special investigative committee commissioned by Theodore Roosevelt, and proposed budgets to clean up the alleys, the dwellings did not receive proactive physical results.⁸ Grace Bicknell writes in *The Inhabited Alleys of Washington, D.C.* about the reality of the slums, which by 1913 and 1914, had close to 96,000 African American residents, with 11% of them living in the over 230 blocks that made up the alleys⁹:

It is said to be quite impossible for Washington alleys to have the efficient police service that is given to the streets, for the reason that the policeman cannot see into the alley from the street and there is not a sufficient number of policemen to keep one stationed in each of the larger alleys without withdrawing some from the streets. The scenes which take place in some of these alleys after night-fall are indescribable. A self-respecting woman in Logan's Court [one of the alley dwelling areas], forced to live there because of fact that the rent is lower than on the street, complained to the Associated Charities that often she was kept awake all night by the screaming and running up and down of drunken people, and that she was compelled to shut her children in the house after supper, even on very warm evenings, because of the vile language and the shocking sights continually before their eyes...The enclosed alley encourages obscenity and low standards of

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ This committee of fifteen was commissioned in 1907, and their report on the alleys published in 1908.

⁹ Sina Dubovoy, *Ellen A. Wilson: The Woman Who Made a President*, (New York: Nova Publications, 2004), 235. Dubovoy claims 64,000 African American residents, while, Eleanor Wilson McAdoo mentions in her book, *The Woodrow Wilsons*, that there were "ninety-six thousand Negroes in Washington, one-third of the population." Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, *The Woodrow Wilsons* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 236. Edward Robb Ellis backs the figure of 96,000 in his book, *Echoes of Distant Thunder: Life in the United States 1914-1918* (New York: Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan, 1975).

living and fosters disease. Last year 114 persons were arrested in Snow's Court alone [one of the alley dwelling areas].¹⁰

Bicknell's essay reveals how the high rent prices and unhealthy aspects of the alleys were seen as a burden to those unable to afford better housing. However, the crime and perceived immorality, and the threat that it might spread, became one of the concerns about the slums. This concern for the welfare of others became known as "municipal housekeeping," which saw reformers, particularly women, focus on the idea of keeping cities sanitary and healthy.¹¹ Though written in 2005, an article about poor housing and its relationship to health echo the concerns of a hundred years prior;

Lack of sidewalks, bike paths, and recreational areas in some communities discourages physical activity and contributes to obesity; in those low-income areas that do have such amenities, the threat of crime keeps many people inside. Income segregation—the practice of housing the poor in discrete areas of a city—has also been linked with obesity and adverse mental health outcomes. Lack of a supermarket in a neighborhood limits residents' access to healthy foods. Dilapidated housing is associated with exposures to lead, asthma triggers (such as mold, moisture, dust mites, and rodents), and mental health stressors such as violence and social isolation.¹²

According to the May 1913 edition of *The Bulletin*, there were 16,000 residents in the alleys, 14,000 of them African American.¹³ Historian Michael McGerr argues that at this point in time, many social reformers believed that "If the poor could not save

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600-1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009), 201.

¹² Ernie Hood, "Dwelling Disparities: How Poor Housing Leads to Poor Health," *Environmental Health Perspectives* 113, no. 5 (May 2005): A312.

¹³ "Work Done in the Federal Buildings," *The Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (May 1913): 3.

themselves...then it was up to compassionate outsiders to remake the working class.”¹⁴

Edith Elmer Wood, a housing reformer in Washington, D.C., reflects this consciousness:

“Our attention was first concentrated on the physical characteristics of the dwellings.

This led naturally to the questions, how much do owners get from this class of property?

And what is the effect, moral and physical, on the people who live there?”¹⁵ One of the

reforming organizations that questioned this was the NCF and, specifically, the Woman’s

Department of the NCF.

The NCF, founded in 1900, was a social, reform-centered organization, also described as “a tripartite policy reform organization,” and consisted of men, women, businessmen, union leaders, social reformers, politicians, academics, and lawyers.¹⁶

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the NCF became one of the most influential and prominent organizations to advocate social reform. In March 1908, the

NCF inaugurated its newly formed Woman’s Department. Despite the fact that the NCF

opposed woman suffrage, “it nevertheless supported women’s traditional maternal role as central to the welfare of the republic and as a safeguard against the destruction of

American institutions by revolutionary groups.”¹⁷ The Woman’s Department represented

a “safe” opportunity for women to become involved, while maintaining their

maternalism. For the male leaders in the NCF, “[they] lived in mortal fear that the

¹⁴. Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Content: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 100.

¹⁵. Edith Elmer Wood, “Four Washington Alleys,” *Survey* 31 (December 6, 1913): 250. The *Survey* was published by the Survey Associates and the Charity Organization Society of the City of New York. Wood received a Ph.D. from Columbia University in New York, as well as authoring many books on housing and housing reform. Her papers are currently located at Columbia University. http://findingaids.cul.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-a/ldpd_3460606/summary

¹⁶. Christopher J. Cyphers, *The National Civic Federations and the Making of a New Liberalism, 1900-1915* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 3.

¹⁷. *Ibid.*, 58.

Woman's Department, if accorded too much power and autonomy, would become the staging area within the NCF itself for an organized suffrage movement."¹⁸

Welfare work became one of the main focuses of the Woman's Department, and during the administration of William Howard Taft, First Lady Helen Herron Taft began her involvement with the NCF. In 1908, Helen Taft spoke publicly at a NCF convention, which, according to her biographer Carl Sferrazza Anthony, "was a bold move and complete departure from her past."¹⁹ Named as an honorary chairwoman of the Woman's Department, Taft became involved with welfare issues, but purposely chose not to involve herself with the alley dwellings. Illness soon prevented her from working further with the NCF, and Taft later "lent her name to their efforts, attended their annual meeting, and held a garden party for their membership."²⁰ While Helen Taft helped form a connection between the office of the First Lady and the NCF, she did not begin the concept of a publicly involved First Lady. It would be Ellen who would truly build the bridge of public activism between the White House and NCF.

The Woman's Department of the NCF soon found a new leader, eager to continue the social reforming efforts of the organizations, while looking for a champion in urban renewal. Charlotte Hopkins came from a politically influential Massachusetts family. Her grandfather was famous orator and politician, Edward Everett, and her father, Captain

¹⁸ Ibid., 70. Cyphers also writes how the women in the National Civic Federation saw maternalism as "the application of Victorian motherhood to the crusade for the betterment of workers' physical and moral welfare" while the male members and leaders, "saw maternalism as a foil against both suffrage and socialism." (71) Another discussion of how progressives viewed inner city slums can be found in David Ward's "The Progressives and the Urban Question: British and American Responses to the Inner City Slums 1880-1920," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 9, no. 3 (1984): 299-314.

¹⁹ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *Nellie Taft: The Unconventional First Lady of the Ragtime Era* (New York: William Morrow, 2005), 250.

²⁰ Ibid., 322.

Henry Augustus Wise, a naval officer and author of novels under the pen name Harry Gringo.²¹ Born in 1851, Hopkins married former military officer and lawyer, Archibald Hopkins, and became a central and key figure in Washington, D.C.²² The situation and the conditions of the alley dwellings needed attention, and Charlotte Hopkins' dedication to housing reform was evident in her work with the Associated Charities' Committee on the Improvement of Housing Conditions.²³ When Hopkins met with Ellen in March 1913, she alerted the First Lady to the appalling circumstances, exacerbated by slumlords and "unwritten law which excluded blacks from buying homes in the better parts of Washington."²⁴ Ellen would soon become immersed in social reform and produce significant results, including her work beyond the color line with the African American inhabitants, which was unusual for a southern woman of her standing.

One of the other aspects of Ellen's work with the slums dealt with the nature of her racial consciousness, which can be considered Southern Progressive in the proper sense. What is significant about Ellen's racial consciousness is how far apart she and Woodrow Wilson were on this issue. Wilson is known in history as *the* 'Progressive President' because of all he did to regulate the economy and tackle monopolies; but on racial policy, he was far from progressive. Wilson's segregation of the Washington, D.C., governmental workers was not out of the norm, because in the South, race relations during Progressivism meant the maintenance of Jim Crow laws. Wilson's cabinet was

²¹ Edward Everett holds the distinction of speaking at the dedication of the National Cemetery in Gettysburg, right before Lincoln delivered the "Gettysburg Address."

²² "Mrs. W.A. Hopkins Dies in Bay State: 'Grand Old Lady' of Washington Knew Every President From the Time of Lincoln," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1935.

²³ Howard Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 121.

²⁴ Frances Wright Saunders, *First Lady Between Two Worlds: Ellen Axson Wilson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 245.

populated with Southerners. Ellen was in a minority, but was not alone in wanting uplift and to help African Americans. Ellen should also be considered within the context of Southern Progressivism with regards to race.

In his groundbreaking work *Southern Progressivism*, Dewey Grantham describes the movement as a “wide-ranging but loosely coordinated attempt to modernize the South and to humanize its institutions without abandoning its more desirable values and traditions...Southern progressives were moderate, eclectic, and resourceful in their approach to social problems.”²⁵ Grantham also examines the shift in social reform work and movements in the South by stating, “Social welfare increasingly reflected not only a more ‘scientific’ approach in providing relief to pauper but also more concern...with environmental improvements as a means of ameliorating poverty, dependency, and disease. Greater stress was being placed on casework, surveys, and education”²⁶ Historian William A. Link sees Southern progressivism as a paradox and “a clash between radically divergent views of the social contract.”²⁷ When it came to race, “Southern social reformers often expressed a strange combination of ideas: a fervent belief in white supremacy along with a belief in the necessity of black progress.”²⁸ The shifting emphasis of social reform in Southern progressivism that Grantham discusses, coupled with Link’s reinforcement of its paradoxical tendencies, helps to place Ellen in the context of Southern progressivism. Ellen is an example of Southern progressive thinking, but at the same time, the Southern progressive thinking does not appear to have

²⁵. Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xvi.

²⁶. *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁷. William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xi.

²⁸. *Ibid.*, 68.

influenced her.

Ellen differs from Wilson in that she did something to help; racial consciousness manifested itself as a major component and an important aspect in Ellen's life. However, her views on race are a part of a larger, more complex sphere of her life. She descended not only from a predominately Southern-rooted family, but also from slaveholders. Reconstruction in Rome, Georgia, as elsewhere throughout the South, was a hotbed for racial tensions, as previously discussed. Segregation as a legal system did not formally begin until after 1896, although white supremacy in the post-war period reigned from shortly after Reconstruction and throughout Ellen's life. These factors in her life are juxtaposed with Ellen's work with, and for, African Americans, beginning in her early adult life and continuing in her reforming efforts as First Lady. The questions are therefore posed: what exactly were Ellen's feelings concerning race? Was her overall involvement in African-American affairs altruistic or a part of segregationist tendencies? When her daughter Jessie suggested that Ellen was as racially biased in her views as Wilson, was that an accurate representation or reluctance on Ellen's part to contradict her husband? Evidence indicates that while Ellen held racial biases characteristic for whites during her day, she exhibited ideas far more in line with racial progressives of her day than did her husband.

The roots of her racial views need a beginning point. Ellen's family was slaveowners in the Antebellum period. Her paternal grandfather, the Reverend Dr. Isaac Stockton Keith (I.S.K.) Axson, stalwart minister at the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, Georgia, from 1857 to 1891 and first cousin to Benjamin Morgan Palmer, owned seven slaves in Liberty County, Georgia, in 1840 and reportedly ran a rice

plantation, as well.²⁹ By 1850, I.S.K. Axson owned sixteen slaves in Liberty County, ranging in age from seventy-five to one year old. In 1860, he resided in Savannah and owned four slaves.³⁰ Ellen's maternal grandfather, the Reverend Dr. Nathan Hoyt, a Presbyterian minister in Athens, Georgia, also owned slaves. In 1850, Hoyt owned five slaves and in 1860, three slaves, with the oldest slave listed as a mulatto.³¹

Interestingly, Ellen later claimed that her mother and grandmother were "both slave-owners."³² However, while Ellen's maternal and paternal grandmothers "owned" slaves via their husbands, it has not been confirmed in other records, such as the U.S. Federal Slave Schedules, that Ellen's parents personally owned slaves. Considering that Ellen's parents were living with family on a plantation in Edgefield County, South Carolina, in 1860 and, in 1850, her mother lived with her family in Athens, Georgia, and her father with his family in Liberty County, Georgia, it is possible that Ellen's mother had close contact with the slaves owned by her family and also, the Axson family slaves.³³ Despite this contradiction, Ellen's maternal and paternal families owned slaves for at least two decades. Also, since Ellen was born in 1860, it is unlikely she would have personally remembered any slaves, but she did have family stories about Antebellum life and slavery. Ellen's knowledge of slavery came second-hand.

²⁹ 1840 U.S. Census, Liberty County, Georgia, population schedule, p. 191 (penned). <http://www.ancestry.com>.

³⁰ Slave schedules, 1850 U.S. Census, Liberty County, Georgia, population schedule, District 15, p. 6 (penned). <http://www.ancestry.com>; Slave schedules, 1860 U.S. Census, Chatham County, Georgia, population schedule, City of Savannah, Enumeration District [ED] 3, p. 58 (penned). <http://www.ancestry.com>.

³¹ Slave schedules, 1850 U.S. Census, Clarke County, Georgia, population schedule, Athens District, p. 25 (penned). <http://www.ancestry.com>; Slave schedules, 1860 U.S. Census, Clarke County, Georgia, population schedule, Athens, District 216, p. 66 (penned). <http://www.ancestry.com>.

³² Mrs. Ernest P. Bicknell, "The Home-Maker of the White House: Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's Social Work in Washington," *The Survey* 33, no. 1 (October, 1914-March 1915): 20.

³³ 1860 U.S. Census, Edgefield County, South Carolina, Beech Island, population schedule, p. 16 (penned). <http://www.ancestry.com>.

Another aspect of interaction between African Americans and whites also appeared courtesy of her grandfather. I.S.K. Axson performed marriage ceremonies between African American couples, especially in the Reconstruction Era and early 1880s.³⁴ In a June 1885 letter to Wilson, shortly before their marriage, Ellen wrote, “Last night there was a ring at the bell and it proved to be a coloured girl asking if Grandfather would marry her!...She wanted it to be next Thursday night; whereupon Uncle R. called out to tell that it couldn’t be done until ‘Wed. night week!’”³⁵ Dubovoy makes a note that when these events occurred—her grandfather marrying African American couples—it was not “unusual to the race-conscious Ellen.”³⁶ It is not safe to assume that because Ellen would mention an African American couple married by her grandfather that it is an indication she was excessively race-conscious. This comment appears that Ellen’s intention is to recount news to Wilson, not necessarily create a racial commentary, as Dubovoy is inferring.

It is highly probable that Ellen’s parents employed African American servants. During her early years, Ellen’s mother, “customarily hired black women cheaply for...chores. [And] even hired a black nursemaid for Ellen.”³⁷ However, Ellen does not mention or reference this in her letters to Wilson. It is possible that Dubovoy saw this reference in a 1913 article written about the new First Lady, when it erroneously recounts

³⁴ Dubovoy, 3.

³⁵ Letter to Ellen Axson from Woodrow Wilson, April 12, 1885, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 4, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 719. The reason why I.S.K. Axson could not perform that wedding on a Thursday was because Ellen’s wedding was that next week. Also, the “Uncle R.” mentioned is Ellen’s paternal uncle, Randolph Axson.

³⁶ Dubovoy, 3. Dubovoy also states that Ellen “casually mentioned the marriage of a simple black couple in her grandfather’s church.” (Ibid.) What is odd about this statement is that Dubovoy adds the term “simple black couple,” though Ellen did not use that term.

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

the “first” meeting between Ellen and Wilson: “It was in Rome, Ga. Tommy [Woodrow Wilson] was trundling a hoop and little Ellen Louise Axson was walking meekly at the side of her black mammy.”³⁸ If Ellen had servants in her household, it is also possible they lived in the slums of Rome. Her paternal grandparents employed African American servants, as well; it is possible that the servants in I.S.K. Axson’s employment were his former slaves.

Ellen’s volunteering and work at the Spring Street Mission School highlights Wilson’s unhappiness with Ellen’s teaching at the school, which more than likely stemmed from his own racial views, particularly discontent with her close association with African Americans. Ellen’s biographer Kristie Miller depicts the relationship between Ellen and Wilson; “In the matters of racial bias, she recognized her shortcomings and strove to be more tolerant. He never challenged the status quo in this regard.”³⁹ Ellen had traveled to Gainesville, Georgia, for the births of Margaret and Jessie, and after the birth of Margaret, she had written to Wilson, “How *very* fortunate I was to get Mrs. Shepard! I don’t know what we all would have done last week if we had had a stupid negro in her place.”⁴⁰ However, she later wrote to Wilson,

Oh, I am so glad you havn’t any of those prejudices! What a clog they would be at once to your use-fulness and your success in life. I am glad to find since coming South that I have gotten rid of them to a greater extent than I thought. You know I am always trying to shake them but I scarcely knew to what extent I had succeeded because of my occasional relap[s]es. For at the North, something *will* happen now and again to produce in me a strong revulsion

³⁸. “The New Mistress of the White House,” *Current Opinion*, March 1913, 196.

³⁹. Kristie Miller, *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson’s First Ladies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 8.

⁴⁰. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson Wilson, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 5, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 177.

of feeling. And of course those prejudices exist for me now—when they exist at all—altogether as *feelings*, not as *opinions*.⁴¹

By the 1890s and turn of the century, she illustrates having made significant strides in her efforts to overcome racial biases. Frances Saunders suggests that, “Snobbery and bigotry were totally out of character for Ellen Wilson.”⁴²

Her daughter Eleanor alludes to Ellen’s discomfort with overt racism, as she frequently exclaimed, “Oh, Woodrow, you know you don’t mean that”⁴³ when Wilson would tell jokes in the “‘Negro’ dialect.”⁴⁴ However, according to Kristie Miller, “Ellen did not tell such jokes or express any amusement at them.”⁴⁵ These differences between Wilson and Ellen are again highlighted by Eleanor, who wrote: “I went [to Raleigh, North Carolina, for school] determined to acquire an accent like [Ellen’s], and in a few weeks was more Southern than any Southerner—speaking what father [Woodrow Wilson] called ‘educated nigger.’”⁴⁶

Her daughter Jessie’s statement to Wilson biographer Ray Stannard Baker that Ellen “[seemed] to have no African American friends...[she] felt much more strongly about drawing the color line than did her father,”⁴⁷ arguably speaks more of Ellen’s wish not to confront or challenge her husband’s strong opinions than of her agreeing with him. Ellen’s lack of openly contradicting her husband also led Jessie to state that Ellen “‘felt much more strongly about the color line than did [Wilson], and that she had ‘far more of

⁴¹ Ibid., May 22, 1886, 251.

⁴² Saunders, 325.

⁴³ Eleanor Wilson McAdoo, *The Woodrow Wilsons* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), 22.

⁴⁴ Miller, 77.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁷ Miller, 76.

the old southern feeling, with its curious paradox of a warm personal liking for the old Negroes, combined with an instinctive hostility to certain assumptions of equality.”⁴⁸

Kristie Miller writes, “While it is unlikely that Ellen ever condoned complete equality between the races, there is no evidence of her actively trying to thwart the progress of African Americans, and many examples of her trying to improve their lives.”⁴⁹

When Woodrow Wilson became the president of Princeton University on October 25, 1902, the ceremony included, among an extensive guest list, J. Pierpont Morgan, Mark Twain, Robert T. Lincoln, Grover Cleveland, and from the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington. After the ceremony, Washington was invited to a celebration dinner at Prospect House, Ellen and Wilson’s home at Princeton. Jessie later recounted to Ray Stannard Baker that this upset Ellen’s maternal aunt, Sadie Hoyt. Jessie stated, “That Booker T. Washington was present [at Prospect House] so scandalized an unreconstructed aunt of ours that she said that if she had known he was to be there she wouldn’t have come (which scandalized us) and Father said that Booker T’s speech was the very best at the dinner afterwards, bar none.”⁵⁰ Ellen was “unperturbed by Sadie Hoyt’s imprecations.”⁵¹ This also showed her openness to challenging the southern racial status quo.

⁴⁸. Saunders, 325.

⁴⁹. Miller, 77.

⁵⁰. Ray Stannard Baker, *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters. Princeton, 1890-1910* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1927), 140.

⁵¹. Saunders, 144. Interestingly, a year before, on October 16, 1901, Booker T. Washington had been invited to the White House for dinner with Theodore Roosevelt. This caused quite a reaction, because “as a policy, blacks were not admitted to the receptions [at the White House]” in the latter part of the nineteenth century. (William Seale, *The President’s House: A History: Volume 2* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1986), 653.) Roosevelt’s wife, Edith, “excluded” African Americans from her social events at the White House. (*Ibid.*, 709).

In 1888, there is a notable event as seen in a letter to Woodrow Wilson. He received a copy of George Washington Cable's *The Negro Question*, from Brown University professor and friend John Franklin Jameson, a criticism on Southern racism and subsequently, a controversial work. Jameson stated "I have enclosed...my copy of Mr. Cable's pamphlet on the Negro Question, which Mrs. Wilson may like to read."⁵² *The Negro Question* dealt with civil rights for African Americans, particularly in the South, with essays that challenged racism. One essay was entitled, "A Simpler Southern Question," which stated in part,

But the Negro will vote. Surely, many will say, that was abundantly tried, and earned its own condemnation in the corruptions and disasters of the Reconstruction period. Now this would be a fair statement only if the ultimate purpose of the Reconstruction scheme had been simply to secure the Negro in his right to vote. We shall see that it was not. Much less was it to establish, to use Senator Hampton's phrase, 'the political supremacy of the Negro,' or, as Mr. Watterson charges, to erect 'a black oligarchy at the South,' or, as Governor Colquitt puts it, "to Africanize the states of the South." These definitions belong—to borrow again Mr. Watterson's thought—to the hysterics of the question. That fervid writer more than half refutes the charge when he follows it closely with the assertion that 'the scheme was preposterous in its failure to recognize the simplest operation of human nature upon human affairs, and in its total lack of foresight.' But surely, whatever may be said of Sumner, Stevens, and the men who gathered around them, they were not a herd of perfect fools with a 'total lack of foresight.' Not the scheme was, but the charge that this was the scheme is, 'preposterous.' The scheme included the establishment of the Negro in his right to vote; but its greater design was... 'to put race rule of all sorts under foot, and set up the common rule of all,' or rather 'the consent of all to the rule of a minority the choice of

⁵² Letter to Woodrow Wilson from John Franklin Jameson, November 20, 1888, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 6, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 23.

majority, frequently appealed to without the respect of persons.⁵³

Ellen's invitation to Booker T. Washington to have dinner at Prospect House and her interest in Cable's controversial book call to question Jessie's earlier statements about Ellen's attitudes toward African Americans. It is unlikely she would have invited Booker T. Washington for dinner or read *The Negro Question* if she shared typical white supremacist ideas of her day. While neither she nor Wilson documents her reaction to *The Negro Question*, Jameson's comment that Ellen would be interested in reading it indicates an openly voiced interest and a questioning on her part among intellectual elites with whom she shared frequent company.

Ellen's tenure as First Lady brought her ideas of social and racial justice to the forefront during the height of the Progressive Era. Ellen worked tirelessly, at the expense of her health, to bring awareness to the Washington, D.C., slums. Ellen also worked to draft the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914 and became the first First Lady to have a direct link to the drafting, lobbying, and publicly seeking support for a bill. The Bill ultimately eliminated the dwellings and converted the alleys to minor streets that would make room for smaller, adequate houses.

Lillian Rogers Parks, a maid at the White House, wrote in her memoirs that her mother, another White House maid, said, "I think we have an angel in the White House. She is talking about helping the poor and improving the housing."⁵⁴ The White House staff was predominately African American: "With the exception of the chauffeur, the

⁵³. George Washington Cable, *The Negro Question*, ed. Arlin Turner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1958), 171.

⁵⁴. Lillian Rogers Parks, *My Thirty Years Backstairs At The White House* (New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1961), 130.

cook, and the ladies' maid, all the servants were colored," according to the Wilson daughters.⁵⁵ Although Ellen's efforts to help the African American residents in the Washington alleys demonstrate more racial open mindedness in some instances, Ellen's desire to involve herself in reform had repercussions. In 1913, Ellen visited the Governmental Printing Offices and Post Office, in order to evaluate the working conditions there. Word spread that Ellen was "much displeased at the whites and negroes were mixed up in the bureau of engraving and printing."⁵⁶ *The Crisis*, the publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reported that "During the early days of this administration, Mrs. Wilson was reported to have observed with her own eyes some of the hardships of white women in having to work beside Negro men. Naturally, with her refined breeding and Southern rearing, she had perceived the dangers of that situation."⁵⁷ Hopkins refuted that Ellen had had this reaction, stating in *The Washington Post*,

Mrs. Wilson did remark on the fact that the whites and negroes working together, and was informed that no distinctions were made with regard to color in the government departments, and that was all there was to the matter. Mrs. Wilson is too kind and nice to the workers along these lines for us to let anything like these rumors get out, and I deeply regret that such things have happened.⁵⁸

Ellen's lobbying and demands for better working conditions for the women and other governmental workers were met. Unfortunately, the governmental offices were now segregated, which prompted many to believe that Ellen had influenced this new

⁵⁵. Dubovoy, 231.

⁵⁶. "Not a Civic Speaker," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 1913. The governmental offices of Washington were integrated.

⁵⁷. "Opinion," *The Crisis* 9, no. 3 (January 1915): 124.

⁵⁸. "Not a Civic Speaker."

segregation of the workers. Richard Wormser in his book, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* states, “The President’s wife, Ellen Wilson, was said to have a hand in expanding the segregation of federal employees in Washington. Blacks were shunted off into dimly lit and poorly ventilated rooms away from whites, forced out of lunchrooms, and required to use separate toilets.”⁵⁹ First Lady historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony rejects this idea, as Ellen “was shocked...at the working conditions, not integration. This was a woman who had lived and worked in New York, and was used to integration.”⁶⁰ Kristie Miller, on the other hand, states “It is fair to ask whether Ellen played a role in these decisions.”⁶¹ Members of Woodrow Wilson’s cabinet, Albert Burleson, the Postmaster General, William G. McAdoo, the Treasury Secretary, and Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy, along with the President, had made the decision to segregate the governmental offices soon after Wilson became President in March, months before Ellen’s visit in October.⁶² These men were Southern, which clearly influenced their decision to segregate. This decision on Wilson’s part to segregate is a part of his life-long mindset, despite assurances from his biographer Arthur S. Link that “Wilson is supposed to have been a southerner most markedly in his attitudes toward the Negro. However, if he was a southerner in this regard, he belonged to that tiny minority who were in advance even of the groups whom Guion Griffis Johnson has called progressionists and paternalist.”⁶³

According to Kenneth O’Reilly in his article for *The Journal of Blacks in Higher*

⁵⁹ Richard Wormser, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 119.

⁶⁰ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961* (New York: Quill/William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990), 346.

⁶¹ Miller, 76.

⁶² Cleveland M. Green, “Prejudices and Empty Promises: Woodrow Wilson’s Betrayal of the Negro, 1910-1919,” *The Crisis* 87, no.9 (November 1980), 382.

⁶³ Arthur S. Link, “Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner,” *The Journal of Southern History* 36, no.1 (February 1970): 10.

Education, “In Wilson’s view, slavery was part of the caviling process. He said that Reconstruction was nothing more than ‘a host of dusky children untimely put out of school.’”⁶⁴ In July 1913, in a letter to journalist Oswald Garrison Villard, a member of the NAACP and grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, Wilson wrote,

It is true that the segregation of the colored employees in the several departments was begun upon the initiative and at the suggestion of several of the heads of departments, but as much in the interest of the negroes as for any other reason, with the approval of some of the most influential negroes I know.⁶⁵

African Americans were extremely upset at Wilson, despite his claims of their approval.⁶⁶ Also, crucially, Ellen did not appear to render any influence at all in the introduction of segregation. These measures were discussed, and put in place, by those interested in keeping the ‘status quo’ of Jim Crow laws. Also, while in the White House, Wilson, “permitted a private White House screening of *Birth of a Nation*, the D.W. Griffith Reconstruction epic inspired by Thomas Dixon's novel (*The Clansman*)” and consequently “encouraged Cabinet members and their families to attend.”⁶⁷ Wilson also called *Birth of a Nation* “History written with lightning.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Kenneth O’Reilly, “The Jim Crow Policies of Woodrow Wilson,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no.17 (Autumn 1997): 117.

⁶⁵ Letter to Oscar Garrison Villard from Woodrow Wilson, July 23, 1913, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 65. The extensive footnote on pages 498-500 in this same volume goes into further detail on the segregation scandal.

⁶⁶ Wilson would meet with Harvard educated William Monroe Trotter, an African American newspaper editor from Boston, in November 1914. It is reported that they “shouted” at each other for an hour, as Trotter was extremely upset with Wilson’s segregationist policies. A succinct recount of this can be read in “Remembering William Monroe Trotter: The First and Only Black Man to Be Thrown out of the Oval Office,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 46 (Winter 2004-2005): 50-51.

⁶⁷ O’Reilly, 119.

⁶⁸ Ibid. A good analysis and discussion *Birth of A Nation* may be read in Arthur Lennig’s “Myth and Fact: The Reception of “The Birth of a Nation,” *Film History* 16, no. 2 (2004) 117-141.

While Wilson was criticized by African Americans for his actions toward them, Ellen's work with the slums of Washington, D.C., earned praise from African American-based newspapers, such as the *Washington Bee*, which declared "Mrs. Wilson ... established a precedent that was foreign to many in her race."⁶⁹ In 1970, the same year as Arthur Link's article, "Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner," Morton Sosna wrote an article with his interpretations on Wilson's racial consciousness:

While Wilson harbored many of the usual Southern—indeed national—prejudices against Afro-Americans, he realized that these did not square with the lofty ideals of his New Freedom. The office of President gave Wilson a sense of obligation toward all Americans regardless of their color. He considered himself the elected leader of the entire nation, not of just one section or race. At one point he even admitted to Oswald Garrison Villard, the white chairman of the board of the NAACP, that thinking about racial antipathies in America caused him to feel "shame and humiliation." Wilson viewed Negroes as a backward rather than an inherently degraded race. But if Wilson recognized that black Americans were mistreated, he did not believe that their situation called for a bitter protest on their part. The Negro masses, as Wilson saw it, would rise gradually through education, vocational guidance, and improved economic opportunities. But even here Wilson was inconsistent. While its president from 1902 to 1910, for example, Wilson did nothing to change Princeton's traditional hostility toward Negro students. No black man could enter the institution, making Princeton one of the few Northern universities to retain such a policy. Woodrow Wilson was simply not a man who would allow even a moderate approach to the race issue to rock the boat or interfere with the operations of duly established authorities.

⁶⁹ "In A Worthy Cause," *The Washington Bee*, April 1, 1916. While her work with the slums has been praised, a few later writers were critical of Ellen's involvement with the slums, saying "her brand of philanthropy [was] incredibly patronizing." Constance Green, *The Secret City. A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), 175. Ellen's biographers have also mentioned Green's comment, but without a comment of their own. It seems harsh to state that Ellen was being patronizing, considering she was humanizing and persistently working for better conditions in the alleys. Charlotte Hopkins believed that without Ellen's involvement, the slums would have continued to languish, as they had for decades prior to her becoming First Lady.

Though he personally hoped to avoid the race issue, the new President—his implicit promises to black leaders notwithstanding—was not prepared to resist pressures calling for federal segregation.⁷⁰

Because of her marriage to Wilson, Ellen is often associated with the same racial tendencies as her husband. It is unlikely that if she ascribed to ‘traditional’ white supremacist values, she would have personally toured the alleys, talking to the inhabitants. Instead, Ellen would have maintained a ‘hands-off’ approach to the alleys, busying herself with other aspects of her White House duties. Instead, Ellen persisted in cleaning up the alley dwellings, determined to create better sanitary housing for the African American inhabitants. Ellen is often ignored as a social reformer because of an assumption about her racial ideas. However, her actions through her life reveal a woman committed to making others’ lives better—no matter the color of their skin.

Ellen’s initial visit to the slums, as referenced in Hopkins’ November 1914 editorial, was delayed because of an outbreak of smallpox in the slums, which also affected the White House, as one of the waiters employed there was sent home because his father died from smallpox. On March 20, 1913, *The New York Times* reported that the day prior,

Mrs. Wilson attended the meeting of the Woman’s Welfare Department of the Civic Federation this morning when she showed an active interest in the working of this society...Mrs. Wilson asked many questions regarding the conditions at Occoquan, also in regard to the housing conditions in Washington and the improvement in the alley

⁷⁰ Morton Sosna, “The South in the Saddle: Racial Politics during the Wilson Years,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 32.

dwelling, in which this section of the Federation is deeply interested.⁷¹

Afterwards, on March 25, Ellen went with Hopkins to the Washington, D.C. Home for Incurables. There is a two-fold significance about this event: first, Ellen's visit to the twenty-five-year-old Home for the Incurables, a palliative care institution for lower-income patients, was the first by a First Lady. While there, she visited each of the patients, talking to them with "comforting words to each one," and shaking their hands.⁷² The second outcome came on that same day. Ellen, accompanied by Hopkins, Grace Vawter Bicknell, and Ellen's daughter, Jessie, traveled in a White House car to the alley dwellings. The trip to the alleys was a secretive one, as *The Washington Post* did not report it for two days. The press subsequently reported details of Ellen's visit to the alleys,

The first section visited was Freeman's court, between M and O and Sixth and Seventh streets southeast. The White House automobile took the tree women there, where they got out and walked through the unattractive surroundings. After inspecting that district Mrs. Wilson and her two guides were driven to Pierce street court, between Pierce and I streets and New Jersey avenue and First Street southeast. A minute inspection of this portion of the city was also made, after which they went to Goat alley...a short trip to Logan court, on Pierce street, between L and North Capitol and First Streets, and a short visit to Fenton place...the smallpox scare in the War Department, which resulted in the vaccination Tuesday [March 25] of Mrs. Wilson and her daughters, also prevented a second start to Willow Tree alley, but such a visit will probably be made in the near future.⁷³

⁷¹. "Mrs. Wilson in Civic Work," *The New York Times*, March 20, 1913. Occoquan was the women's workhouse, or prison, in Virginia that would become associated with suffragists Alice Paul and Lucy Burns in 1917.

⁷². Bicknell, "The Home-Maker of the White House: Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's Social Work in Washington," 19.

⁷³. "Visits the City's Poor," *The Washington Post*, March 27, 1913.

The article also states that Ellen visited the headquarters for the Associated Charities, an organization in which she would involve herself, as well. What the press did not report, however, is that during this personal trip to the alleys, Ellen walked in the alleys, personally speaking to the residents there, all while concealing her identity as First Lady.

The next day, Ellen continued her public support of social reform and social work by attending a meeting of the Southern Industrial Educational Association. In addition to the alley dwellings, Ellen lent her name to a number of social reform and activist causes as First Lady. These causes included education in the South and better working environments for female governmental workers. In this instance, the Southern Industrial Educational Association meeting informed supporters of the educational progress among the poor in mountain districts.⁷⁴ Ellen would eventually become their honorary president, and advance awareness for those in the Appalachian regions by refurbishing part of the White House in hand-woven fabrics and floor coverings.⁷⁵ Ellen also did not forget her roots. In 1914, she established a scholarship in her brother Edward Axson's name at Martha Berry School.⁷⁶ She sold many of her paintings and donated the money to the school: "A Mrs. Barnett who asked some time ago if she might buy one of my small pictures, which she heard I would sell for the school, came in the morning and took two,—for fifty dollars each unframed."⁷⁷ Providing scholarships to enable children,

⁷⁴. "Mrs. Wilson in Civic Work: Attends Meeting for Mountain Whites," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1913.

⁷⁵. Miller, 78.

⁷⁶. "Mrs. Wilson's School Gift," *The New York Times*, January 25, 1914. At this time, Berry College was known as Martha Berry School for Mountain Girls. Ellen's brother Edward, sister-in-law Florence Leach Axson, and almost two-year-old nephew, Edward Stockton had drowned in the Etowah River in 1905.

⁷⁷. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson Wilson, September 21, 1913, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 308.

particularly girls, to attend school, was a cause close to Ellen's heart. As First Lady, Ellen had the ability to bring awareness and achieve change in other areas of reform that concerned her. These included truancy laws, the care of drug addicts, the care of the mentally ill, neglected children, dependent children, child labor laws, adult education, the number of open-air recreation facilities at schools, public baths, community recreation centers, and, most notably, the working conditions at the Government Printing Office and Post Office.⁷⁸

Within these working conditions, Ellen became "distressed" at the limited number of restrooms and lunchrooms available for the workers, as well as poor ventilation systems and lighting, and lack of first-aid services.⁷⁹ She also visited the Printing and Post Offices anonymously, becoming worried when she discovered that the women who repaired the dirty and damaged mailbags were working under unsanitary conditions. She also expressed concern over the possibility of tuberculosis and other diseases being introduced and spread because of the unsanitary situation.⁸⁰ Instead of ignoring what she had witnessed, biographer Kristie Miller writes,

[Ellen] protested to the postmaster general, Albert S. Burleson, that the mailbags should be disinfected. He did not give her a satisfactory response, so when, a few days later, she found herself seated next to Colonel House at a White House luncheon, she mentioned the matter to him. He cavalierly told the first lady that Burleson's method of dealing with microbes was to fumigate them with tobacco and drown them in whiskey. This flippant answer apparently annoyed the usually gracious Ellen, who insisted to House there was a problem. The entire table overheard

⁷⁸ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961*, 347.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁸⁰ "Broke Office Rule for Mrs. Wilson," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1913.

their exchange; House promised Ellen to ‘see that something was done.’⁸¹

Ellen lobbied other Cabinet members to rectify these unsettling deficiencies in the governmental offices, and they were corrected, but at a cost of segregation that is unfairly contributed to Ellen’s intervention. Though the improvement and cleaning up of the Washington, D.C., slums were Ellen’s main focus as First Lady, her involvement in other social reforms and social concerns indicated Ellen’s reshaping of the identity of First Lady.

Shortly after Ellen toured the slums on March 25, 1913, she became a stockholder, in her name, in the Sanitary Housing Company on June 3. The Sanitary Housing Company, founded in 1904, was a “philanthropic organization formed by a number of citizens, mainly from official and scientific circles” with former Surgeon General George M. Sternberg as its head.⁸² In April, Ellen continued to visit the alleys, worked with the NCF, and maintained her duties as First Lady. In the memoirs of her social secretary, Isabella Hagner, it is mentioned that, “on April 3rd, 1913, Mrs. Wilson entertained the women of the NCF. It was about this time that she commenced her ‘slumming parties’ as Helen Bones and I disrespectfully called them, with Mrs. Archibald Hopkins.”⁸³

Surprisingly, Ellen’s name does not appear in the *Washington Post* or *New York*

⁸¹ Miller, 85. This can also be read in an exert from Colonel House’s diary, which is printed in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, volume 28.

⁸² “Sanitary Housing Plan,” *The New York Times*, June 4, 1904. The intention of the Sanitary Housing Company was to build apartments and other forms of sanitary housing for occupants of the alleys. One of their ideas for sanitary housing was inspired by the Octavia Hill plan. For more information on Octavia Hill, see Gillian Darley’s *Octavia Hill: Social Reformer and Founder of the National Trust* (London: Constable, 1990) and Fullerton Leonard Waldo’s *Good Housing That Pays: A Study of the Aims and the Accomplishment of the Octavia Hill Association, 1896-1917* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Harper Press, 1917).

⁸³ Isabella Hagner, “The Wilson Administration Commencing,” unpublished memoirs, Office of the Curator, the White House. Helen Bones was Woodrow Wilson’s cousin, who could be considered Ellen’s assistant, and who later became Edith Galt Wilson’s social secretary.

Times newspapers until late April, when three separate items were published.⁸⁴ The *New York Times* reported that she had scheduled a garden party for that May and sent a telegram of support to Mary Jenkins, principal of the Halstead School for girls, which was meant to spur donations for the school.⁸⁵ Also in April, naval surgeon and Woodrow Wilson's doctor, Cary Travers Grayson, alerted Ellen to the plight of a young boy who was suffering from consumption, or tuberculosis. Ellen immediately wanted to see the boy, and, according to the *New York Times*, she characteristically, "gathered a large bouquet of flowers from the White House gardens, and accompanied by Dr. Grayson, went to the boy's home, which is in the very poorest quarter of Washington. She sat at the lad's bedside for half an hour."⁸⁶ The newspaper using this particular term, 'poorest quarter of Washington,' indicates that this young boy might have been living in or near the slums, as those were the poorest sections of the city.

Starting in May 1913, "no one could move in polite society in Washington who could not talk alleys."⁸⁷ Ellen balanced her White House social duties with an increased participation in the NCF. With their help, she was determined to bring the public's attention, as well as the attention of Washington's political elite, to the alley dwellings. As Isabella Hagner noted in April, Ellen began her "slumming tours," which took Senators, Congressmen, Representatives, their wives, and other influential Washington elite into the alleys for first hand observation. Usually touring numerous alleys at a time,

⁸⁴ The *Washington Post* online archives search, conducted by the author, for this chapter skipped April 1913. As the *New York Times* frequently republished articles and other news items from the *Washington Post*, it is safe to assume that Ellen's name did not appear in the paper until late April.

⁸⁵ "Mrs. Wilson Aids School," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1913.

⁸⁶ "Mrs. Wilson Visits Sick," *The New York Times*, April 27, 1913. The boy's identity is not known.

⁸⁷ Bicknell, "The Home-Maker of the White House: Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's Social Work in Washington," 20.

the slumming groups would travel in White House cars and were intended to build support for alley legislation, as well as lifting the veil off eyes that chose to believe the slums did not exist.⁸⁸ As Isabella Hagner states, “Until that time most of us prided ourselves that we had no slums.”⁸⁹ Despite an announcement in the May 19 edition of the *Washington Post* that Ellen was to address a NCF meeting about the alleys, Charlotte Hopkins had to state the next day that,

We do not expect her to address our meetings, and know that she is too busy to even think of such a thing. Mrs. Wilson is much interested in the work of the organization...and we are glad when she can be with us at our meetings and in our work, but we appreciate the fact that is she addressed our meetings she would receive calls from all of the country to address similar meetings.⁹⁰

Ellen did not publicly address the NCF meetings, but she did privately address those involved with cleaning up the alley dwellings. On May 22, it appeared as though Ellen’s slumming tours were working, with Bicknell stating that the chauffeurs at the White House quickly became familiar with the alley routes.⁹¹ The NCF collected almost \$5,500 in donations at a single meeting, which would total \$119,774.54 today. Ellen donated \$100 toward the fund for cleaning up the slums. The rest were donations from Washington’s society women and men, with \$3,000 recorded as the largest donation received.⁹² This prompted other socially and politically prominent women and men to

⁸⁸. “Wife of President in Slumming Party,” *The Washington Herald*, May 16, 1913.

⁸⁹. Hagner, “The Wilson Administration Commencing,” unpublished memoirs.

⁹⁰. “Mrs. Wilson Will Speak,” *The Washington Post*, May 19, 1913; “Not A Civic Speaker,” *The Washington Post*, May 20, 1913.

⁹¹. Bicknell, *The Home-Maker of the White House: Mrs. Woodrow Wilson’s Social Work in Washington*,” 20.

⁹². “Cleansing Capital’s Slums,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1913. The largest donation came from Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot. When inflated for today, that sum would be \$65,331.57.

join in the campaign to reform the alley dwellings, either by a true willingness to help, being caught up in the spirit of progressivism, or just for inclusion.

One of Ellen's and the NCF's biggest allies was Representative William P. Borland of Missouri. The alley bill that would later be presented in Congress was known as the 'Borland Bill.' After personally witnessing and touring the slums on one of Ellen's tours, he supported the idea of sanitary housing and condemned the existing alleys, a subject Representative Borland addressed in the House of Representatives.⁹³ Ellen continued her slum tours, which covered twenty-three miles, while different measures were introduced in the House of Representatives, calling for money to begin the clean up of the various alleys.⁹⁴ This combined urban renewal and social reforming effort began to blur party lines, and became a bi-partisan issue, one of the lesser-known results from Ellen's involvement with the slums. For example, one of the other supporters in the fight against the alley dwellings was Representative Julius Kahn, a Republican from California. The previously mentioned William Borland was a Democrat.

Soon, a "Committee of Fifty" formed, consisting of prominent or leading men and women from charitable and civic organizations, including the Board of Trade, Chamber of Commerce, the President's Homes Commission, the Woman's Department of the NCF, the Episcopal Social Service Conference, and Associated Charities. The goal of this Committee of Fifty, which received Ellen's full support, focused on creating legislation, crafting a singular alley bill that would address the slums more specifically. The Committee also looked at how sanitary housing could be built, how much these homes

⁹³. "Society Enters Alley Crusades," *The Washington Herald*, May 26, 1913.

⁹⁴. "Pass on Alley Bills," *The Washington Herald*, May 23, 1913. These measures, first aimed at Goat Court and Snow Alley, were precursors to the later Alley Dwelling Act, mentioned later in this chapter.

would rent, and the funds needed to see the work done.⁹⁵ Soon, Ellen's husband offered a public opinion on his wife's activities. Woodrow Wilson announced his support for the efforts of his wife and others with the alley dwellings. A letter he wrote to Hopkins was read aloud at a NCF meeting,

May I not at least send these few lines to express my deep interest in the great task of cleaning away the slums of Washington? It is a work which must, of course, be accomplished step by step. I sincerely hope that each step may be part of a systematic and comprehensive plan, worked out by District authorities with the full authority and support of Congress. Pray feel at liberty to suggest to me from time to time any way in which I may properly assist.⁹⁶

In June, Ellen personally took the Majority Leader of the House of Representatives, Alabama Democratic Senator Oscar Underwood, and progressive Pennsylvania Democratic Representative Alexander Mitchell Palmer, on a tour of the slums in the White House car. The inclusion of these two men in the tours was significant:

It was the first trip of its kind either Mr. Palmer or Mr. Underwood, two of the busiest men in the House had taken, and it is extremely if any woman of less prominence than Mrs. Wilson could have induced the two party leaders to give up a couple of hours to a sociological tour of that kind...Mr. Underwood's word is law in the Democratic Houses, and past experience might almost completely justify the belief that some such strong pressure will be necessary to obtain District legislation of this nature.⁹⁷

⁹⁵. "Want \$100,000 to Fight Slum Evil," *The Washington Times*, May 29, 1913; "Flats to Rent for \$6 a Month," *The Washington Herald*, May 30, 1913. In the report about a meeting from May 29, 1913, an intensive plan for new and better alley housing had begun, which would not come to pass for many years. See chapter four.

⁹⁶. "Impetus Given Fight On Slums," *The Washington Herald*, May 28, 1913.

⁹⁷. "Underwood and Palmer Accompany Mrs. Wilson On Visit To City Slums," *The Washington Herald*, June 4, 1913.

Ellen's name and the fight to clean up the conditions in the slums were synonymous, as her presence made a difference in the efforts to eradicate the alley dwellings. The dwellings quickly became a pressing political issue, transcending mere aesthetic or social concern. William Jennings Bryan, the famous orator and Secretary of State under Wilson, spoke at a meeting that included Ellen, members from the Committee of Fifty, Congressmen, governmental workers, city department members, lawyers, real estate operators, bankers, and other Washington elite. At the meeting, Bryan spoke about the crucial need to remove the slums.

The first reason...considering the question from a purely selfish viewpoint, is that of self-preservation. If we find that the death rate in the alley is twice as high as it is on the street, it is not to our interest to make every effort to remedy the cause? Disease breeds in those places. When a plague enters a city it is invariably by way of its alleys and slums. The second reason may be based on an economic argument. The third reason, and the greatest one of all, is the moral obligation that comes with our sense of brotherhood. Those dwellers in the alleys are our brothers and sisters. The Divine Creator has so linked us all together that we cannot successfully lift ourselves up without lifting them up too.⁹⁸

Bryan continued by acknowledging Ellen's presence in the alley cause by stating, "The most eloquent speech here tonight is the one that has not been made at all, for actions speak louder than words. The fact that the wife of the President is with her presence here lending support to the movement is enough. As crowded as my life is, I feel that if she can find time out of her busy days to be here and to work for this cause, I can too."⁹⁹ He summed up his lengthy speech, saying, "The time is past when a man can enjoy himself and not be interested in all about him. He cannot have an easy conscience

⁹⁸. "'Rid City of Alleys'," *The Washington Post*, June 17, 1913.

⁹⁹. *Ibid.*

unless he is interested in the welfare of his fellowman, cannot retain his self-respect and the respect of others.”¹⁰⁰ At the end of the meeting, Hopkins spoke to attendees, reiterating to the Congressmen about voting for alley improvement, and that “I don’t know whether to address you as gentlemen of the jury or as members of the graduating class...I think though, that I shall address you as members of the graduating class, for you’ve all earned your degree of B.A.—bachelor of alleys.”¹⁰¹ For the housing reformers in the NCF, who first helped to bring the alums and alleys to Ellen’s attention, “[her] involvement in slum clearance gave the topic a respectability and urgency that it had not had.”¹⁰²

This meeting was Ellen’s last for the summer of 1913. Ellen’s daughter Eleanor wrote in *The Woodrow Wilsons*, that throughout her work with the slums, Ellen often returned to the White House “worn and white...we all worried about her, knowing that she did not have the strength to stand work that would have taxed even the strongest and most unimaginative person.”¹⁰³ On June 20, 1913, it was reported in the *New York Times* that Ellen was “indisposed” because of her work with the slums, and was under the care of Dr. Cary Grayson. It was advised that she “abandon” her philanthropic work and escape the Washington, D.C., heat by going north to Cornish, New Hampshire, for the summer.¹⁰⁴ Ellen heeded the advice, and she, along with her daughters, left a week later.

Ellen first visited Massachusetts, and word of her slum activities traveled ahead of

¹⁰⁰. Ibid.

¹⁰¹. Ibid.

¹⁰². Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 144.

¹⁰³. McAdoo, *The Woodrow Wilsons*, 236-237. In his book, *The End of Innocence*, Jonathan Daniels writes, “The White House lawn was hot and yellow. It was no place in such a summer for a pale lady like Mrs. Wilson.” Jonathan Daniels, *The End of Innocence* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1954), 118.

¹⁰⁴. “Mrs. Wilson Needs Rest,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 1913.

her. In July, she wrote to Wilson, “I wonder if you remember that Jessie told us that Mrs. Carter was that charming Miss Henry who used to visit Mrs. Fine at Princeton when we first went there...She says that Mrs. Hopkins told her I had ‘done more good in Washington in four months than any other President’s wife had *ever* done in four years—had completely changed the conditions of life for 12,000 people,—or was it 12,000 alleys?’”¹⁰⁵ While away from the White House, Ellen continued to paint, and had a portrait of herself with Eleanor, Jessie, and Margaret painted by Robert Vonnoh.¹⁰⁶ Also, Ellen and Wilson took the opportunity to announce Jessie’s engagement to Francis Bowes Sayre, a lawyer, law professor at Harvard, and foreign affairs advisor to Siam. In the engagement announcement, Jessie is described as “her attainments place her decidedly above the average American young lady,” with special emphasis on her reform work and social activism after graduating Phi Beta Kappa at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland.

She has always been extremely interested in sociology, and has engaged in much serviceable settlement work. She has labored for the uplift of humanity in the slums of Trenton and New York City, and has spent a great deal of time in the mill districts of Kensington, just outside of Philadelphia. She has often declared that she will never discontinue her sociological efforts for the betterment of conditions among the poor of the large cities.¹⁰⁷

Ironically, on the same day that Jessie’s engagement announcement was published, *The Washington Times* reported the news that a “comprehensive and effective alley elimination program”—expected to receive both Ellen and Wilson’s approval—had been

¹⁰⁵. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Ellen Axson Wilson, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, 20.

¹⁰⁶. This painting now hangs in the Woodrow Wilson House museum on S Street, in Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁷. “Miss Jessie Wilson, Second Daughter of the President, to Wed Francis B. Sayre, of New York,” *The Washington Herald*, July 3, 1913. In a *Good Housekeeping* article from March 1913, Mabel Potter Daggett discusses Jessie’s previous ambition to become a foreign missionary, and membership in the Young Women’s Christian Association.

presented by District Commissioners to Congress.¹⁰⁸ This plan for alley elimination excluded the proposal that the slums be transformed into public parks; instead, it was proposed that the alleys become minor streets. Problems with getting the bill pushed through kept appearing. The discussion and debate over the slum elimination legislation persisted, prompting Ellen to continue her public support of abolishing the alley dwellings.

Upon her return to Washington in October, Ellen resumed her First Lady social duties, as well as her social reforming efforts. Ellen toured the Governmental offices, as mentioned before, and on November 2, she became the Honorary Vice Chairman of the Woman's Welfare Department. The National Chairman stated that Ellen, "was acting, not as the President's wife but as a woman whose heart was in the social welfare movement."¹⁰⁹ Ellen wrote to her cousin, Florence Hoyt Stevens, about her work with the NCF and the slums: "The women are so grateful that it is embarrassing. How they have worked years & years & could get nothing. I have done so little—only been interested. So you remember Wordsworth's 'Simon Lee'? I think of that line, 'The gratitude of man hath oftener left me mourning.'"¹¹⁰

The bill for the alley dwellings made its way to Wilson's desk, as he wrote to Oliver Peck Newman,

I have read the enclosed bill very carefully and have only two comments to make...it made it mandatory upon the Commissioners, after acquiring the alley properties, to sell them in fee... Would it not be better to leave it to the discretion of the Commissioners whether they shall sell or

¹⁰⁸. "Favor Streets in Slum Section," *The Washington Times*, July 7, 1913.

¹⁰⁹. "Mrs. Wilson to Aid," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1913.

¹¹⁰. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Florence Hoyt Stevens, September 14, 1914, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 31, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 29.

lease or themselves improve the property under municipal regulations such as have been adopted, for example, by the City of Glasgow in Scotland?...For the rest, the bill seems to me excellent.¹¹¹

By January, the future Alley Dwelling Act of 1914 was taking shape. Different measures had been introduced, each calling for the proposed municipal improvements and appropriated funding.¹¹² On January 23, 1914, Wilson wrote to Oscar Underwood, discussing legislation he wished to address. In addition to trust bills and the Philippines, Wilson noted, “May I take the liberty of speaking of a subject not in the party programme but very much in my mind and heart? I mean the redemption of the slums of this city (the so-called alleys). I am deeply concerned that the bill on the subject should be taken up at this session, while the interest in its subject-matter is still fresh and vivid.”¹¹³ Two days later, *The Washington Post* announced the headline, “Fight for Slum Bill.” In the discussion of the alley bill, it was noted,

The bill pending provides for the vacating of the inhabited alleys in ten years. The undertaking to change the living conditions of such a large number of persons will be fraught with some difficulties, it is admitted, and welfare workers, assured of the passage of the bill, are already drafting plans to aid in the successful enforcement of the law, and to reduce to the lowest possible minimum any hardships that might be brought about.¹¹⁴

Hopkins stated in the same article, “This housing problem is an enormous one, and we need to have everyone backing us” and “We owe a great deal to [Ellen], not only because

¹¹¹. Letter to Oliver Peck Newman from Woodrow Wilson, November 14, 1913, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, 540.

¹¹². “Commissioners to Ask Special Bills,” *The Washington Times*, December 31, 1913.

¹¹³. Letter to Oscar Wilder Underwood from Woodrow Wilson, January 23, 1914, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 29, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 164.

¹¹⁴. “Fight for Slum Bill,” *The Washington Post*, January 25, 1914.

she gave her name, but because she gave her personal service. We toured most faithfully, and some of the conversions in Congress were so sudden that it was astonishing.”¹¹⁵

With this very public association with the slums came questions about Ellen’s involvement. Bicknell writes that people would ask, “Do you suppose Mrs. Wilson is really interested in this work?” The answer, though already evident, usually garnered this reply from those working with Ellen: “I know she is...no one in her position could expend the effort she does unless it were a matter of principal. She feels that is her duty to use her position to accomplish as much as she is able for the good of others.”¹¹⁶ Ellen’s motivation and reasons for why she became involved with the alley dwellings has no obvious answer. The cause for Ellen’s social reforming efforts, as well as working with African Americans in improving their housing and improving the quality of their lives, is likely deeper than just duty. Ellen’s cousin also offered her own idea about her involvement. Mary Hoyt wrote in a letter to Wilson, days after Ellen’s death,

I have thought ever so often about what you said yesterday and I cannot think that your career killed her. In the first place, her family on both sides is rather short-lived. In the second place, wherever she had placed, she would have found people to whom she would have given herself, and there is never a lack of people who are ready to take. Don’t you remember how, when she was studying here at the Art League, she could not keep herself away from some kind of social work. ‘The need is so great,’ she said; and she would always have found the need great, wherever she was. And is it not a thing to be glad of that you did place her where everyone in this whole land has been able to feel her influence?¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵. Ibid.

¹¹⁶. Bicknell, “The Home-Maker of the White House: Mrs. Woodrow Wilson’s Social Work in Washington,” 21.

¹¹⁷. Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Mary Eloise Hoyt, August 11, 1914, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 30, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 375.

Older chroniclers of Woodrow Wilson had very little to say about Ellen, but did offer their opinions on her reforming work. Cary Grayson, Ellen and Wilson's physician, wrote in his memoirs "[Ellen] maintained her lifelong interest in the welfare of the unfortunate, not as a professional reformer but as one anxious to help those in genuine need of help."¹¹⁸ Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy under Wilson, described Ellen's decision to work with the slums as an extension of her interest with settlement work, and that she was "troubled as she observed the squalor of the alleys in Washington...she felt the conditions where Negroes lived were a disgrace to the national capital and with other good women she set about effecting improvement."¹¹⁹ More contemporary authors, such as Carl Sferrazza Anthony, believed that "Ellen Wilson's only motivation was to help, for she was troubled by the lack of openly public social work in the First Lady role."¹²⁰ Although, Ellen left little that could be directly sourced to her, as most of her papers were either destroyed by Ellen herself or at her request, her record of involvement and the accounts by others around her confirm her convictions and commitment to reform.¹²¹

In March 1914, there was "strong pressure" on the House and Congress to consider the "Borland Bill," which provided for sanitary dwelling construction for unskilled wage-earners, with low rent.¹²² The other aspect of the Borland Bill provided "governmental loans to noncommercial building associations for the purpose of aiding construction of

¹¹⁸ Cary Travers Grayson, *Woodrow Wilson: An Intimate Memoir* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 27-28.

¹¹⁹ Josephus Daniels, *The Wilson Era: Years of Peace, 1910-1917* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 486.

¹²⁰ Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961*, 346.

¹²¹ Miller, 338. Ellen had asked a friend to destroy their correspondence, while Ellen purportedly burned papers while in the White House.

¹²² "Support Given Borland Bill," *The Washington Herald*, March 8, 1914.

such dwellings.”¹²³ The report about the Bill also reiterated that as a result of the “agitation and publically attendant upon the interests of prominent men and women in the alley question, Washington has gained a good deal of unpleasant notoriety.”¹²⁴ Ellen continued her public support and lobbying for support of the Alley Bill, while planning for Eleanor’s wedding to Secretary of the Treasury, Williams Gibbs McAdoo, and designing what would become the White House Rose Garden.¹²⁵ However, on March 1, Ellen slipped on the floor of her bedroom in the White House, suffering an injury, which prompted minor surgery. She stayed in bed most of March, prompting her daughter Eleanor to write, “Helen [Bones] and Margaret [Wilson] and I had a long talk that night. I raged against the social workers who were demanding too much of her, but Helen said that there was nothing to be done about it; that mother had her heart set on getting the bill for better housing conditions in Washington passed by Congress, and that she would not spare herself.”¹²⁶ Rallying a bit in strength in April, Ellen traveled around Washington, D.C., sitting in the Capitol to hear Wilson speak, and receiving news that the National Park System had named a lake in Glacier National Park in her honor.¹²⁷

On May 7, Eleanor married McAdoo. Ellen’s health began a rapid decline. Many in the family saw Ellen’s strength during the wedding as “sheer willpower.”¹²⁸ The medical issues she started to suffer from included acute indigestion, which caused her to experience trouble eating. Ellen knew something was wrong, though she convinced Wilson and her daughters that she was on the mend. In one instance, she reportedly told

^{123.} Ibid.

^{124.} Ibid.

^{125.} Saunders, 267. Jessie had married Francis Sayre November 25, 1913.

^{126.} McAdoo, 276.

^{127.} Saunders, 271. The lake is called “Lake Ellen Wilson.”

^{128.} Ibid., 273.

the Rose Garden designer Charles Henlock, “It will be so lovely Charlie, but I’ll never live to see it finished.”¹²⁹ In early July, Jessie Wilson Sayre announced she was pregnant. Ellen had been bedridden since June, as per Cary Grayson’s orders. He diagnosed Bright’s disease, with “hopelessness of the patient’s recovery.”¹³⁰

It became evident on August 6, 1914, that Ellen was dying. On that same date, Serbia declared war on Germany, while Austria declared war on Russia, signaling the outbreak of World War I. Family and friends kept the news of the war from Ellen, who instead had two different, specific, urgent items she wanted accomplished. First, she said to Wilson, “she believed she could go away more cheerfully if she knew the bill passed.”¹³¹ Word immediately reached Congress, and the Alley Dwelling Elimination Act that Ellen had supported, lobbied for, and had been involved with since its inception was immediately “passed without debate” in the Senate.¹³² *The Washington Post* documented this passage further by stating,

Leaders were informed through the President’s secretary that the dying woman had expressed a hope that a bill designed to eliminate slum life in the Capital City might be passed by Congress before she passed to the beyond. It was a measure in which Mrs. Wilson had been deeply interested. She had personally inspected some of the alleys here, and had assisted in the campaign of brining the matter favorably to the attention of the Senate and House... During a conscious moment in the afternoon Mrs. Wilson was told that the Senate had acted upon the bill, and that it had been reported from a committee of the House and was ready for consideration in that body. Final action was delayed in the

¹²⁹ Ibid., 274. This quote appeared in “Flowers for First Ladies” by Charles Henlock and Margaret Norris, which was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* on November 28, 1931.

¹³⁰ Grayson, 33.

¹³¹ “Nation Mourns Loss of First Lady of Land; Death Shock Capital,” *The Washington Herald*, August 7, 1914.

¹³² “Congress in Brief,” *The Washington Herald*, August 7, 1914.

House because of the announcement of Mrs. Wilson's death.¹³³

On September 25, 1914, the Sixty-Third Congress approved the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914. In the Alley Dwelling Act, it states,

That from and after the passage of this Act it shall be unlawful in the District of Columbia to erect, place, or construct any dwelling on any lot or parcel of ground fronting an alley where such alley is less than thirty feet wide throughout its entire length and which does not run straight to and open on two of the streets bordering the square, and is not supplied with sewer, water mains, and gas or electric light; and in this Act the term 'alley' shall include any and all courts, passages, and thoroughfares, whether public or private... The use or occupation of any building or other structure erected or placed on or along any such alley as a dwelling or residence... and such use or occupation of any such building or other structure on from, and after the first day of July, nineteen hundred and eighteen, shall be unlawful.¹³⁴

This slum bill, though enacted did not necessarily end conditions in the slum the way Ellen intended.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, Ellen's name became attached to a piece of legislation that was the direct result of persistent determination and connected the First Lady to social reform and urban renewal, a progressive first. Ellen was also thinking of Wilson. It became widely reported that her dying words, with Wilson, her daughters, and Cary Grayson at her bedside, were "Doctor, promise me to take good care of my husband."¹³⁶

¹³³. "The Senate, Respecting Her Dying Wish, Passes Mrs. Wilson's Alley Slums Bill," *The Washington Post*, August 7, 1914.

¹³⁴. "Alley Dwelling Act, 1914," *The Congressional Record* 63 (September 25, 1914): 310. Found with thanks to Senator Saxby Chambliss' office, specifically Debbie Cannon, who assisted in searching for this Congressional act.

¹³⁵. This will be discussed in Chapter 5.

¹³⁶. "Nation Mourns Loss of First Lady of Land; Death Shock Capital."

After Grayson confirmed Ellen had died, Wilson stated, “Oh my God, what am I to do?”¹³⁷

News of Ellen’s death made the front page of the newspapers the next day. They recounted her life, her time in the White House, and the particulars of her last hours.¹³⁸

The death of Ellen prompted many tributes to her, as well.

To call her charitable would be to use a debased word and convey the idea of a mere money-giver: her charity was that which longs to bind up the wounded and mend the broken, which finds the greatest joy of life in seeing tears turn to smiles...she rejoiced in becoming mistress of the White House only because it would give her more power to help others, and before she had learned her way down Pennsylvania Avenue she was hunting for the alley slums of Washington, to see whom she could help. It was characteristic of her, though she would have seen nothing worthy of remark in it, that her dying thoughts were for the passage of a bill she had advocated making life easier for the slum dwellers, and the Senate passed it to make her last moments happier.¹³⁹

It is worth noting that one of the sympathies expressed came from the president of the Virginia State Federation of Labor, E.C. Davison, who sent a telegram to Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, stating, “As a tribute to the memory of the late Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, the Virginia Federation of Labor pledges moral and financial assistance to a nation-wide move by the American Federation of Labor, having for its object the cleaning out of slums and the improvement of housing conditions.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷. Saunders, 276.

¹³⁸. Obituaries that are of note are “Mrs. Wilson Dies in White House” in *The New York Times*, “Mrs. Wilson Dies After Long Period of Illness; President is at Bedside” in *The Washington Post*, and “Death Has Summoned Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, in *The Atlanta Constitution*.

¹³⁹. “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 1914.

¹⁴⁰. “Virginia Labor Men Mourn for Mrs. Wilson,” *The Washington Herald*, August 8, 1914.

Ellen was buried in Rome, next to her parents, in Myrtle Hill Cemetery. Her short time in the White House had allowed Ellen the ability to engage both in social reform and urban renewal movements, and would have a lasting and profound impact. She may not have viewed her work with the alley dwellings or the NCF as significant as it was, but Ellen demonstrated that a First Lady's public support and involvement in an issue could be crucially important. The slums of Washington, D.C. became the catalyst not only for progressive reform, but also for Ellen's historical legacy.

Chapter V

“SHE WAS SO QUIET THAT I THINK A GREAT MANY PEOPLE DID NOT REALIZE HER STRENGTH OF CHARACTER AND FORCE.”

As his second wife, Edith Bolling Galt served as Wilson’s second First Lady five years and three months. Ellen only served in this role for eighteen months. Such a time gap may explain why Edith is most often recognized as Wilson’s First Lady, as well as being dubbed “secret president” upon Wilson’s stroke in 1919.¹ However, Ellen has maintained a legacy worthy of scholarly and popular understanding. She helped to influence Eleanor Roosevelt, and later First Ladies, by modeling what a socially activist President’s wife could achieve. Ellen also used her position as First Lady to influence legislation on public housing that bore her name for decades to follow.

Eleanor Roosevelt is viewed as the matriarch of First Lady social activism. Beginning in her late teens and lasting throughout Eleanor’s lifetime, she maintained a commitment to human rights and all forms of social justice, including civil rights, women’s rights, and assistance for the impoverished. While these issues were at the forefront of Eleanor’s tenure as First Lady, she too involved herself with Charlotte Hopkins and the NCF. In 1933, according to Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor’s “first public act” as First Lady was to go tour the alleys of Washington, D.C.²

¹ <http://edithbollingwilson.org/>

² Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One: 1884-1933* (New York: Viking, 1992), 205.

Ten years later, Eleanor would write about the experience of visiting the alleys with Hopkins in her *My Day* column, stating, “These conditions exist in the capital of the United States, and I think for that reason are of interest to the country as a whole” and “the more you will be awake to their implications if they are happening in your own home area.”³ However, part of Eleanor’s desire to work with the Washington, D.C., slums began in 1913, when as the young wife of the new Deputy Secretary of the Navy, she accompanied Ellen to tour the slums. Ellen’s open approach to activism, as well as the legislation that resulted, certainly influenced Eleanor.

Ellen and Eleanor came from substantially different backgrounds. Ellen’s upbringing and background has already been discussed in Chapter 2. Ellen’s work with the Washington, D.C., slums received local and national attention. One article on November 19, 1913, entitled “Helps Civic Workers,” cites Hopkins as she addressed over 200 women at the monthly meeting of the NCF. Hopkins states, “The splendid help both in personal effort and backing, given by Mrs. Woodrow Wilson has been of incalculable help. We can never be sufficiently grateful to her for what she has done. She has set a standard for wives of future presidents which will be hard to reach.”⁴

Ellen had created this precedent by directing the public’s attention toward the dilapidated and pitiful environment of the slums. One of those people on Ellen’s slum tours was Eleanor, who referred to them in one of her *My Day* columns by writing, “The Senators of that day were aroused to their first action by the sight of their senatorial

³. Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, *My Day* column, December 21, 1943
<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?v=1943&f=md056673>

⁴. “Helps Civic Workers,” *The Washington Post*, November 19, 1913.

laundry blowing in the wind of one of these typical alley backyards.”⁵ Ellen’s death in August 1914 from Bright’s Disease spurred the passage of the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914 which helped to improve and clean up alley conditions. It was Ellen’s determination and vigilance that brought the public’s awareness to the alleys and slums of Washington, D.C. She utilized her position as First Lady to elevate the role beyond traditional hostessing expectations. She was also the first to use her position as First Lady, in a very public way, to help the African American community, who would praise her as an “angel,” though it would earn her some criticism from those who did not care for her actions.⁶ Between 1914 and 1933, the role of the First Ladies leaned more towards hostesses rather than social reformers. This would change in 1933 when the socially conscious Eleanor moved into the White House.

Eleanor’s life both differed and mirrored Ellen’s. Born Anna Eleanor Roosevelt on October 11, 1884, in New York City, Roosevelt came from a wealthy, high society, yet unstable family. Because of her physical appearance—she was nicknamed “Granny”—her mother consistently made fun of Eleanor, leaving the young girl to feel unloved and constantly to seek approval.⁷ She writes in her autobiography, “I was made to feel so conscious of the fact that nothing about me would attract attention or would bring me admiration.”⁸ In contrast, her father, Elliott Roosevelt (youngest brother of Theodore Roosevelt) adored her, though his alcoholism kept him from being a permanent presence

⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, *My Day* column, December 21, 1943.

http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1943&_f=md056673

⁶ Lillian Rogers Parks, *My Thirty Years Backstairs At The White House* (New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1961), 130. Those who criticized Ellen’s efforts included Constance Green, who wrote *Secret City*.

⁷ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One: 1884-1933*, 21.

⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1961; repr., Irwindale, California: G.K. Hall, 1984), 10.

in Eleanor's life. According to Blanche Wiesen Cook, "Her childhood was a time of anguish and tragedy...it was also in the end a world shattered by disappointment, alcoholism, and betrayal."⁹ After the death of her parents—first her mother in 1892 and her father in 1894—Eleanor was sent to her grandmother's home, then off to Allenwood, a boarding school in England. Both sides of Eleanor's family held their social status in high regard; she would chafe underneath this fixation on social status, and it would be at Allenwood that Eleanor discovered that there was more to life than one's place in society. Mlle. Marie Souvestre, the headmistress at Allenwood, encouraged independent thinking, and, according to Eleanor, "this was the first time in my life that my fears left me."¹⁰

Eleanor returned to New York in 1902. She was "especially drawn" to the immigrants in New York City and also had an interest in the conditions of their housing, work, and wages: "the more [she] saw of the living conditions in New York City's tenements, the stronger her commitment grew to helping those in a part of society quite different from her own."¹¹ Like Ellen, Eleanor worked while in New York City, teaching dance and exercise at the Rivington Street Settlement. Eleanor loved working with the residents, especially children, of the tenement houses and also showed interest in civic organizations during this period: "[her] most gratifying hours...were spent in volunteer work."¹² Eleanor married her distant cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt in March 1905. This marriage would later become a powerful political partnership, where both Roosevelt and Eleanor needed the other for advice and support. FDR's political involvement and

⁹ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One: 1884-1933*, 38.

¹⁰ Roosevelt, 24.

¹¹ Allida M. Black and Mary Jo Blinker, *Fundamental Freedoms: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc., 2010), 23-24.

¹² Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One: 1884-1933*, 134.

presidential dreams led to Eleanor crossing paths with Ellen, when FDR became Deputy Secretary of the Navy under Wilson in 1913.¹³

Initially, Eleanor held an unfavorable opinion of Ellen when they first met. Eleanor wrote to a friend, “[Ellen] seemed a nice intelligent woman but not overburdened with charm.”¹⁴ In 1992, Blanche Wiesen Cook wrote that Eleanor “failed to even support... Wilson’s crusade against the vile housing conditions endured by Washington’s black population.”¹⁵ However, Eleanor’s opinion later changed about Ellen, and she became “particularly informed and impressed.”¹⁶ In 1999, Cook wrote, “Wilson’s efforts to build decent housing and abolish Washington’s ‘alleys slums’ particularly captured ER’s imagination as First Lady. Like Wilson, ER believed that adequate and healthy housing was the fundamental key to a more democratic future.”¹⁷ In this manner, Ellen influenced Eleanor as First Lady, “for when the latter assumed the role, she took an interest in the deplorable housing conditions of African Americans in the District of Columbia as well.”¹⁸ Kristie Miller writes in her biography of Ellen that, “while Eleanor was not at the time an active participant in Ellen’s urban renewal project, she took note of the legislation that resulted from the first lady’s activism.”¹⁹ However, Eleanor, as wife of the Deputy Secretary of the Navy, could not have escaped Ellen’s tours of the slums, as practically all of Washington, D.C.’s government elite and upper class participated in the

¹³. Ibid., 200-201.

¹⁴. Ibid., 200.

¹⁵. Ibid., 204.

¹⁶ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume Two: 1933-1938, The Defining Years* (New York: Viking, 1999), 17.

¹⁷. Ibid., 18.

¹⁸. Maureen H. Beasley, Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds. *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing, 2001), 184.

¹⁹. Miller, 93.

tours.²⁰ Eleanor referenced that visiting the slums in 1913 influenced her work with the slums again in 1933, stating, “Housing is no new interest of mine in the District of Columbia.”²¹

It is highly likely, especially with Eleanor’s actions toward the slums as First Lady that she had participated in Ellen’s efforts with the slums in 1913 and 1914. Eleanor’s first public act as First Lady in 1933 was to visit the alleys with Charlotte Hopkins, “The Grand Old Lady” of Washington.²² By 1933, “twelve thousand blacks and a thousand whites lived in desperate circumstances.”²³ While Ellen’s original 1914 Bill had intended to “dismantle the alleys and convert them to parks or new roadways,” it was suspended because of the onset of World War I.²⁴ Eleanor, along with Hopkins, walked among the residents of the slums, “unrecognized.” She and other officials with her witnessed first hand “crowded spaces where garbage was never collected by authorities paid to do so. They...learned of the suffering, disease, and infant deaths...they witnessed rats as big as cats. The alley death rate from tuberculosis was 50% higher than elsewhere.”²⁵ It is not hard to imagine that these scenes were familiar to Eleanor, having witnessed the same conditions twenty years earlier.

Eleanor brought the public’s attention and focus back to the alleys and slums; Cook writes, “she continued Ellen Wilson’s crusade for twelve years.”²⁶ Eleanor became an “honorary chairman” for the Washington Committee on Housing, and in 1934, a new

²⁰ Beasley, et. al, 184.

²¹ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, *My Day* column, December 21, 1943.

²² http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1943&_f=md056673

²³ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume Two: 1933-1938, The Defining Years*, 156.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 157.

²⁶ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One: 1884-1933*, 205.

form of legislation was aimed once again at the Washington, D.C., alleys. She offered her support for the legislation that Hopkins and John Ihder, the executive officer of the Washington D.C. Alley Dwelling Authority and National Capital Housing Authority, were proposing. This legislation had the intention of “study[ing] Washington’s slum conditions with funds made available under Hoover’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation.”²⁶ Eleanor informed Hopkins that when the Bill was to be presented, “the President says he will invite the House and Senate leaders and heads of Committees to drive through the alleys with him, and he rather expects the bill will pass.”²⁷ This echoes Ellen’s tactics of involving the politicians, which also shows the continuing thread of Ellen’s influence on Eleanor; “[Eleanor] was determined to end the mean and vile conditions just behind the great and comfortable houses.”²⁸ Eleanor devoted her *My Day* column on December 21, 1943, ten years after her initial “reconnection” with the alleys, to a retrospective about the alleys. She wrote,

Mrs. Archibald Hopkins interested Mrs. Woodrow Wilson in the condition of Washington alleys...Mrs. Hopkins was still alive when I came back to Washington in 1933, and one of the first things I did was to visit some of these alleys with her. Through the Alley Dwelling Authority, considerable constructive work has been done to eliminate bad places and to increase decent housing, but it has never gone fast enough and there have always been bad spots in the nation's capital.²⁹

In June 1934, Congress finally passed the new Alley Dwelling Act, which in part created the Alley Dwelling Authority. According to Cook, “Eleanor ‘suggested to the

²⁶ Howard Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 138.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume Two: 1933-1938, The Defining Years*, 157.

²⁹ Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project, *My Day* column, December 21, 1943

<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?v=1943&f=md056673>

President' that he invite Charlotte Everett Hopkins to the Bill's signing."³⁰ Eleanor would be one of the Alley Dwelling Authority's greatest supporters. Roosevelt gave credit to the eighty-three year old Hopkins, who had worked closely and personally with two First Ladies to help improve the slums conditions. In addition to Hopkins's personal triumph, the Alley Dwelling Act of 1934 signaled the culmination of Ellen's tireless efforts to clean up the alley dwellings of Washington, D.C. Hopkins spoke at the bill signing on June 12, 1934, stating, "the worst thing we've had to fight has been indifference."³¹ Had Ellen been alive, she would have undoubtedly agreed. She had been the first to call the public's attention to the alleys' conditions and literally worked until her death to help the residents in the slums. With the help of the reform-minded Eleanor Roosevelt, the construction of decent housing in the alleys, called the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, extended the accomplishments of Ellen's activism.

Ellen and Eleanor were First Ladies separated by two decades, which included World War I and the Great Depression. Eleanor is viewed correctly as the modern activist, the reforming "First Lady of the World."³² Until of late, the connection between Ellen and Eleanor has gone unnoticed. Historian Edward Robb Ellis called Ellen "the Eleanor Roosevelt of her day" in his book, *Echoes of Distant Thunder: Life in the United States, 1914-1918*.³³ Near Ellen's gravesite in Myrtle Hill Cemetery in Rome, Georgia, a plaque has been erected by the Rome Area Heritage Foundation, which states, "Eleanor

³⁰ Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume Two: 1933-1938, The Defining Years*, 188.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor: The Years Alone* (Old Saybrook, Connecticut: Konecky & Konecky, 1972), 219. President Harry S Truman was one of the first to call Eleanor by this term.

³³ Edward Robb Ellis, *Echoes of Distant Thunder: Life in the United States, 1914-1918*, (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1975), 151.

Roosevelt considered Mrs. Wilson a mentor on social issues.”³⁴ It is extraordinary to contemplate that of the most beloved and socially aware First Ladies in history, Eleanor Roosevelt, was inspired by the quiet, southern Ellen. In a way, Ellen’s legacy with the Washington, D.C., slums lived on through Eleanor Roosevelt, and then beyond as the namesake of public housing in the reformed alleys.

Public housing traces another aspect of Ellen’s social reforming efforts.³⁵ Ellen’s desire for suitable housing in the slums of Washington, D.C., led to her public advocacy of the Alley Dwelling Act. After Ellen’s death on August 6, 1914, her hope for urban renewal did not die with her. In November 1914, Hopkins wrote an editorial for *The Bulletin*, the Women’s Department of the NCF’s quarterly publication. Hopkins wrote the editorial in remembrance of Ellen, while also reinforcing Ellen’s commitment to social reform and activism. It is in this editorial that Hopkins first mentions the memorial project, built on the Alley Dwelling Act, which made it unlawful to construct inadequate housing, but did not make provisions for the displaced residents or replacement housing.

The Civic Federation appeals, not only to the District of Columbia Section, but to its members throughout the country, and, in fact, to all women to bring every pressure to bear on their own members of Congress and Senators to complete this legislation, which is to make the houses of the poor in Washington, and living conditions in general, an object lesson to the whole country; a standard to be lived up to everywhere if only as a tribute to the life and work of one of the greatest women who ever was in the White House. [Ellen] once said to me she felt that this work, which she considered national, was the most worthwhile. As an outward visible sign of what she has done, I hope, through the help of the women in this country, to be able see erected at least one model block, with its interior park, wash houses and all the things [Ellen] dreamed of, and have it known as the

³⁴ As viewed on a personal trip to Rome, Georgia, by the author on August 28, 2004.

³⁵ It is necessary to note that after Ellen’s death, her daughter Margaret “initially followed the example of Ellen Wilson, her mother, in such efforts. Margaret joined forces with those civic and neighborhood groups seeking access to public school facilities; she undertook this task partly because of her father’s earlier endorsement of the community center idea.” Ronald Johnson, “Black and White Apart: The Community Center in the District of Columbia,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 52 (1989): 15.

‘Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes’ in loving memory of one whose short public life should be an inspiration to the women of the whole country.³⁶

In February 1915, the annual report for the Women’s Department was published in *The Bulletin*. While the author is anonymous, it is more than likely Hopkins because of the praise for Ellen, which has language reminiscent of the November 1914 editorial: “Her unfailing sympathy and understanding of the crying needs of others was the secret by which she endeared herself to all with whom she came in personal contact... The Women’s Department has indeed lost a friend, one whose memory will never be forgotten.”³⁷ In this same issue of *The Bulletin*, a lengthy discussion, written by Hopkins, appears and discusses the five reasons why the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes are needed in Washington, D.C,

To emphasize the quiet, unobtrusive work that Mrs. Wilson did in her all too short life in Washington, the District of Columbia Section is trying to build a block of model houses to be known as the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, the manifold object of which is first, to the wife of the president, a memorial that will perpetuate the humanitarian work she did during her life in the White House; second, for the poor of Washington, clean and healthy houses replacing the unsightly and unsanitary alley hovels; third, for the National Capital, a block of model tenements that will be a very cornerstone for the city beautiful plan that is being built here; fourth, for the people of the United States, an example and inspiration for proper housing; and fifth, for those with money to invest, an opportunity that will pay them 5% in cash and profits in the consciousness of having made lives healthier, happier and more helpful, which will appeal to all those who wish to be philanthropic but are not always able to give without receiving a safe return.³⁸

³⁶. Charlotte Hopkins, “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson,” *The Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (November 1914): 3-4.

³⁷. “Annual Report—Women’s Department,” *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 3.

³⁸. Charlotte Hopkins, “Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes,” *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 18.

In this same article, Hopkins proceeds to describe in detail the exact layout and buildings that would encompass the Memorial Homes. She states there are to be 125 houses for 250 families, along with shops, a market and apothecary, a playground, small library, a wading pool for the little children, a small hospital, and “an administration building, to contain a laundry with facilities for 32 women doing washing and ironing, at 3 cents an hour which covers all expenses.”³⁹ Hopkins also mentions, which Eleanor later referenced in her *My Day* column, “The laundry alone is of great interest to Washington residents, many of whom have their washing done under the most unsanitary conditions in squalid alley homes.”⁴⁰ This statement can be interpreted as a way for Hopkins to incite Washington, D.C.’s citizens to donate financially to the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, by connecting their dirty laundry to the alleys. In terms of cost, Hopkins estimated that the total amount for building the Memorial Homes would be close to \$350,000, with an ideal rental price for the potential residents at \$7.50 to \$17.50 per month. To achieve this, Hopkins asks for donations, which she states range from as little as one dollar, up to one hundred dollars and over.⁴¹

On March 3, 1915, seven months after Ellen’s death, Wilson signed a bill that incorporated the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, after it had passed Congress on March

1. Part of the Bill states,

The purposes of the of the corporation hereby created, which purposes are declared to be to acquire, hold, improve, rent, mortgage, sell, and convey real estate with the District of Columbia for building, in the memory of the late Mrs. Woodrow Wilson, one or more blocks of sanitary houses for the working classes, and renting the same at a rental sufficiently low to cause the abandonment of dilapidated

³⁹. Ibid.

⁴⁰. Ibid.

⁴¹. Ibid., 18-19.

and insanitary houses, as an object lesson in the housing of the working classes under good conditions and at reasonable rates: *Provided*, That the value of any and all property so acquired shall not exceed the sum of \$500,000: *Provided further*, That no land shall be acquired or house built thereon except of the character herein before described.⁴²

The group of incorporators included George Foster Peabody, Hugh C. Wallace, Arthur Jeffrey Parsons, Walter S. Ufford, Archibald Hopkins, Julia C. Lanthrop, Grace Vawter Bicknell, and Charlotte Hopkins.⁴³ Following the incorporators were the approved Directors, who included members of the Women's Department of the National Civic Federation: Mrs. William Cumming Story, Mrs. Joseph Lamar, Charlotte Hopkins, Julia Lanthrop, Arthur J. Parsons, Stanton C. Peele, Mrs. Richard Wainwright, General W.C. Gorgas, Mrs. J. Nota McGill, Miss Clara Farrar-Smith, Mrs. J. Borden Harrison, Miss Anne Morgan, Mrs. H.K. Willard, and Mrs. Abram Simon. They were authorized to "manage the finances, pay the dividends...and will manage the business affairs of the corporation."⁴⁴ An Advisory Board for the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes was also chosen, which included William Jennings Bryan and his wife, Mary Baird Jennings, former President and Supreme Court Justice William Howard Taft and his wife, Helen Herron Taft, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and his wife, Addie Bagley Daniels, Colonel Edward House, Vice-President Thomas Marshall and his wife, Lois Kimsey Marshall, Federal Reserve Board member, William P.G. Harding, and John Jay Hammond and his wife, Natalie Harris Hammond.⁴⁵ When reviewing these names, it is

⁴² By the Act To Incorporate the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, *Congressional Serial Set* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1915), 420-421.

⁴³ "Memorial for Mrs. Wilson," *The New York Times*, March 3, 1915.

⁴⁴ "Town Planning and Housing: The Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes," *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 3 (1915), 357.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* This is a partial list of the advisory board.

obvious that Washington's government elite were willing to have their names attached to the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes project, which had already been endorsed by the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Jewish Council of Women, and other clubs and organizations around Washington, D.C.⁴⁶

On June 21, 1915, a little over three months after the incorporation of the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, Hopkins wrote a letter to Wilson. In the letter, she writes of her intended goals with the Memorial Homes, including finances and how the Homes met with opposition:

The reason I feel so strongly about your indorsement [sic] is because, confidentially, I have met in many directions, and particularly among the Southern element, with opposition because this first block is to be for colored people. In every instance I have replied that Mrs. Wilson understood the general situation, grasping at a glance the fact that with 96,000 negroes, a third of the population, the great crying need was improved living conditions, as, partly from poverty and *partly from a certain unwritten law that they cannot live in the better parts of the town,*⁴⁷ and also because of the landlords of colored sections keep only just within the law as to repairs...all of this reacts in the white population, Mrs. Wilson never made any secret to any of the men she took in the alleys that the work she was trying to do in passing the bill was to improve the conditions of the negroes. Only 2,000 whites live in these alleys...she went to the Colored Social Settlement and gave them money and in all her work her interest centered in what she saw was to improve the living conditions of the negro. I have tried my best to make this clear to the various Southern people who have criticized this work because it is for the negroes and if you could in any way make that clear in your note of approval it would be a great help.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Hopkins, "Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes," *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 19.

⁴⁷ The italics indicate my emphasis.

⁴⁸ Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Charlotte Everett Wise Hopkins, June 21, 1915, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 430.

Hopkins goes on to write, “My hope is, in fact my faith is, that once this block is built, similar blocks will rise up all over the country for all races, black and white, American and foreigners.”⁴⁹

Hopkins also mentions the possibility of the General Film Company, a leading silent film organization, making a film about the alley conditions, which Hopkins indicates she discussed with Ellen; the film would trace the development and building of the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, as well as filming the families who would live in the new sanitary homes.⁵⁰ For Wilson’s part, Hopkins informs the president, “your cooperation, of course in the simplest way, and nothing that would be any lack of dignity in your position—only if you should sit for a picture to show you signing the act of Congress abolishing the alleys and the act of Congress incorporating the Memorial, possibly with a picture of Mrs. Wilson on the desk.”⁵¹ She assures Wilson, “You will of course believe me that I would have nothing done that would not be absolutely dignified and in keeping not only with your great position but with the sweet woman in whose honor I am trying to do it.”⁵² The discussion of a possible film that would highlight and visually acknowledge Ellen’s efforts with the alleys shows the deepening impact that her presence made with urban renewal. Wilson responded with a short letter a month later, as he was “absorbed in other matters,” but assured Hopkins, “It gives me great pleasure to say that your plans for model tenements have my very warm approval. I do not feel that I am entitled to any expert judgment in these matters, but the plans seem to me very

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Letter to Woodrow Wilson from Charlotte Everett Wise Hopkins, June 21, 1915, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 33, 431. However, it does not appear the film was ever made. This revelation about the possible film that never came to fruition has gone unmentioned in other biographies and other works about Ellen.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

admirable indeed and my heart, I need hardly say, is very much engaged in the enterprise.”⁵³

An extraordinary, but not surprising, aspect of the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes involves the architects who were commissioned to design the Memorial Homes. The first female-only architectural firms, the Firm of Schenk and Mead, based in New York, were hired to plan the layout and details of the Memorial Homes. Anna Pendleton Schenk had been a draughtsman for Grosvenor Atterbury, a renowned architect and urban planner, while Marcia Mead had attended Columbia University School of Architecture, then worked in Chicago and New York.⁵⁴ In February 1915, Hopkins discussed Schenk and Mead, writing, “Being a woman’s appeal to women, in memory of a woman, the plans are being drawn by women architects, the Misses Schenk and Mead, and not only cover all the things which will go to make the useful, but are graceful and attractive in every way.”⁵⁵ In September 1915, Mead published an article that contained the original layout and design plans for the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes from the first part of the year. Mead writes, “Here we find the poor, who need the helping and guiding hand, living in unbelievable conditions and surroundings...Progress in the improvement of these conditions was practically at a standstill when Mr. Wilson was elected to the presidency and took up his residence in the White House.”⁵⁶

Mead describes aspects of the layout and other plans for the Memorial Homes. The

⁵³ Letter to Charlotte Everett Wise Hopkins from Woodrow Wilson, July 23, 1915, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 34, eds. Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 16.

⁵⁴ “These Two Girls Form First Firm of Women Architects in New York City,” *The Day*, March 19, 1914. Their later credentials also include designing the Gateway Village District in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

⁵⁵ Hopkins, “Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes,” *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 18.

⁵⁶ Marcia Mead, “The Ellen Wilson Homes; Nation Wide Movement for a Fitting Memorial in Washington to the Wife of the President,” *The Real Estate Magazine*, September 1915, 51.

proposed new apartment dwellings for one thousand people ranged from two-room, three-room, four-room, and six-room apartments, along with a five-room house. According to Mead, the two-room apartment could easily accommodate “a man and wife with a child up to three years [who] may live comfortably.”⁵⁷ Her discussion illustrates the way the on-site hospital, children’s nursery for working mothers, rooms for different clubs, social halls, shops with sundry items and food for everyday needs, a library, and a playground would enhance the livability of the homes. All of these inclusions to the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes area would encourage “the general welfare and pleasure of the people of the community.”⁵⁸ In addition to printed drawings of the intended Memorial Homes block, the firm assured that “President Wilson...has given them his hearty approval and is highly gratified with the undertaking.”⁵⁹ Overall, Schenk and Mead promised that with the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, and the corporation of the same name, “the success of the project is practically assured.”⁶⁰

In 1915, the NAACP reported in *The Crisis*, “The colored people of Washington, D.C., will be given model homes, in the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, soon to be built in that city.”⁶¹ A description of the homes was reported in *The Washington Post* in August 1915. The media attention continued with an article in the *Washington Post* in January 1916 bearing the headline “Civic Workers’ Report,” which offered an update on the alleys:

⁵⁷. Ibid., 53.

⁵⁸. Ibid.

⁵⁹. Ibid., 56. The estimated total cost for building the Memorial Homes was close to \$350,000.00, with a 9½% return for those who invested. The total cost of building the apartments and homes would cost \$274,189.00, while building the library, playground, and main building would cost \$317,684.00. The cost of buying the land totaled to \$30,316.00, which was an end cost of \$348,000.00 overall. (Ibid., 58).

⁶⁰. Ibid., 56.

⁶¹. “Along the Color Line,” *The Crisis* 11, no. 1 (November 1915): 9.

The alley population of Washington has declined in the last few years from 21,000 to 9,000 was the statement of Mrs. Ernest P. Bicknell, chairman of the housing committee, in her report. This decline together of alley homes need not be accomplished under the law until 1918 had reduced the work of the committee, she said...the proposed Ellen Wilson memorial, which is to consist of a group of model workmen's houses, is practically finished.⁶²

Sadly, the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes as they had been intended were never built. Isabella Hagner in her memoirs wrote, "I will say that there was a plan on foot, which was nearing completion, for Congress to appropriate a large sum of money to complete this purpose so dear to Mrs. Wilson's heart as a memorial to her. At the time of the announcement of the President's engagement and second marriage, I suppose it was deemed advisable to abandon the idea."⁶³ In likelihood, it was a combination of the presence of the second Mrs. Wilson and World War I, especially after the United States entered in 1917, which halted plans. It would not be until the 1930s that any action with the slums would be taken, as a result of revitalization.

The Alley Dwelling Act of 1914 saw its urban renewal revitalization begin again in 1934, when Congress, along with the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, established the Alley Dwelling Authority. Former New York Times reporter and public housing supporter, John Ihlder, headed the Alley Dwelling Authority, which received full support from Eleanor Roosevelt. It had renewed Ellen's aspiration for sanitary housing; "The agency was empowered under Title I of its legislation to clear and revitalize alley slums. When the Federal government undertook a national public housing program in

⁶². "Civic Workers' Report," *The Washington Post*, January 13, 1916.

⁶³. Isabella Hagner, "The Wilson Administration Commencing," unpublished memoirs, Office of the Curator, the White House.

1937, a Title II was added to allow the District agency to participate.”⁶⁴ The intention with the Alley Dwelling Authority, which was later known as the National Capital Housing Authority, echoed the earlier statements in the Alley Dwelling Act of 1914. A new wave of urban and social reform had begun; Ihlder referred to it as a “slum reclamation program.”⁶⁵ The Alley Dwelling Authority stated, “No alley houses were to be inhabited after July 1, 1944.”⁶⁶ The late 1930s saw eighteen buildings erected, called the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, in the old Navy Place slums of the 1880s, which had been the intended recipients of the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes. However, these homes were specifically for white renters of low-income.⁶⁷ These new houses were called “spacious, garden style apartments” and designed by Arthur B. Heaton, the architect who supervised the building of the Washington National Cathedral.⁶⁸

In 1943, an article focusing on the new attempt to clean up the alleys appeared in *The Washington Post*. However, it focuses on promoting the unpleasant aesthetics of the slums and how property values around the slums were affected. It also neglects to mention either Ellen or the National Civic Federation, tending to overlook the people living there, while comparing rebuilding the Washington, D.C., slums to the rebuilding of slums in other major cities, such as Baltimore, New York, Chicago, and Santa Barbara.

More than 20,000 old dwellings should be replaced, the majority of these being in fairly compact blighted areas, with a few good houses interspersed...experience has

⁶⁴ William R. Barnes, “A Battle for Washington: Ideology, Racism, and Self-Interest in the Controversy over Public Housing, 1943-1946,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 50 (1980): 453.

⁶⁵ “Elimination of Unsightly Areas Here Is Declared Necessary,” *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1943.

⁶⁶ James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 52.

⁶⁷ Laura Lang, “Dream City,” *Washington City Paper*, April 16-22, 1999.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

proved that unless spots are eliminated they will grow until, like the inhabited alleys, they have rotted whole neighborhoods...from the point of meeting the need, it makes comparatively little difference whether this slum reclamation is done by public or private enterprise, provided it is done, [Ihlder] made clear.⁶⁹

Unlike previous attempts at creating sanitary public housing in 1915 and 1916, a citizens' group saved the housing in the slums, and the alley dwellings remained inhabited throughout the 1970s. African Americans returned to the Ellen Wilson Dwellings in the 1950s.⁷⁰ The housing and the residents became economically divided at this point in time.⁷¹ The Dwellings began to face a downward turn in the 1980s when they fell into disrepair and became a haven for prostitution and drug dealers. What had begun as sanitary housing to replace slum and alley housing reverted back to slum housing. In 1988, the 5.3 acres of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings were officially abandoned and the residents were forced to leave.⁷² Soon, the Ellen Wilson Dwellings were described as a "hellhole" and "crime-ridden."⁷³ An article in the *Washington Post* depicted the Dwellings as "Vacant low-rise apartment-buildings spill rubble, as if hit by a bomb. They appear deserted, until a dazed-looking, shirtless man peers warily out an upper-story window, then steps back into the shadows. Used syringes and all manner of garbage lie among buildings, inside and out. At night there are rats, fires, screams."⁷⁴

⁶⁹. "Elimination of Unsightly Areas Here Is Declared Necessary," *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1943.

⁷⁰. In the 1940s, two housing projects were set aside for African Americans: Arthur Capper and Carrolsburg Dwellings. Abt Associates, Inc., *An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI* (1996), 4-4.

⁷¹. Borchert, 54-55.

⁷². Sina Dubovoy references a statue of Ellen had possibly been located in one of the courtyards in the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, but there is no evidence for the claim and no trace of such statue.

⁷³. Lang, "Dream City."

⁷⁴. William F. Powers, "A Housing Complex D.C. Forgot: Group Seeks to Transform Abandoned Ellen Wilson Dwellings," *The Washington Post*, August 22, 1992.

However, this would not be the end of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, or the end of Ellen's legacy with the alleys.

The abandoned 5.3 acres of the ten blocks that made up the Ellen Wilson Dwellings once again became the focal point of urban renewal and new housing that would benefit displaced and future residents. A 1992 article in the *Washington Post* detailed how 11,500 people were awaiting the public housing that the city had not yet provided, and that the downfall of the Ellen Wilson Dwellings represented “another un-kept political promise [and] a symbol of perhaps the greatest enemy of progress in public housing—bureaucratic entropy.”⁷⁵ A group of residents, activists, and businessmen took action to rescue the housing. The Ellen Wilson Neighborhood Redevelopment Corporation proposed, pending District approval, to demolish the old buildings and construct replacement housing on the site of the former Dwellings, with additions for those in lower and middle-income brackets.⁷⁶ The article also mentions “the kind of income mix the group tentatively envisions, ranging from units reserved for families with 25 percent or less of the area median income—about \$59,000 for a family of four—to other units—about 30 percent of the total—that would be rented at market rates.”⁷⁷

Almost a year later, in 1993, another article in the *Washington Post* detailed the opposition occurring with the proposed plans by a joint venture of the Ellen Wilson Redevelopment and the Telesis Corporation. Marilyn Melkonian, the president of Telesis Corporation and former deputy assistant secretary of Housing and Urban Development, declared that the new housing would be “a very innovative development that breaks

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Powers. Other names for the group also include the Ellen Wilson Redevelopment, or the Ellen Wilson Community Development Corporation.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

many of the forms [and] structure of traditional public housing.”⁷⁸ However, some believed, including the vice-president of National Capital Bank, that “It’s not innovative, it’s retrogressive...it is what I call a taxpayer’s nightmare.”⁷⁹ One interesting aspect to the proposed new homes built on the former Ellen Wilson Dwellings included, “the public housing units to include a form of cooperative ‘ownership’ by residents.”⁸⁰ One of the ways that the new homes were to be funded was through federal monies, which opponents charged would once again divide the new housing between the poor and private-owned homes. With the help of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Ellen Wilson Redevelopment Corporation succeeded in rebuilding a new set of 134 homes. In 1992, HUD created a new plan based on the 134 homes, renamed Urban Revitalization Demonstration, called the HOPE VI program.

Revitalizing the worst and most dilapidated public housing development was the intended goal of the HOPE VI program.⁸¹ Fortunately for the Ellen Wilson Redevelopment Corporation, their proposed new public housing became the recipient of HUD and HOPE VI money, along with the site receiving Historic Preservation approval. The new brick housing received a federal grant of a little over 25 million dollars, without the need for government subsidies afterwards, as a private corporation would manage the new housing units.⁸² Once again developers chose a woman architect to design the new

⁷⁸ William F. Powers, “On Capitol Hill, A Fight Over Housing Blight; Plan to Rebuild Long-Neglected Ellen Wilson Dwellings Gains Momentum—and Opposition,” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 1993.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ In addition to the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, HOPE VI also provided federal grants to Baltimore, Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. For more details, read *An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI*, cited in the bibliography.

⁸² Vernon Loeb, “After Three Decades, The Bulldozers Show Up; Rebuilding of Ellen Wilson Dwellings Begins,” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1996.

housing. Amy Weinstein, of Amy Weinsten & Associates in Washington, D.C., stated in an interview in 1996,

‘We’re trying to build regular-people houses,’ Weinstein explains, adding that just because people are poor doesn’t mean they don’t want a nice kitchen just like other people. Instead of apartments, the new units will be town houses and duplexes with English basements. Future Ellen Wilson residents will not have the shared stairwells and elevators that local muggers find so inviting. The house designs will vary so that it won’t look like some prefab housing development in Columbia. ‘It’s more expensive to vary the design in Ellen Wilson,’ she says, but explains that the neighborhood is much happier with the plan because it blends in with existing housing.⁸³

The new housing consisted of 134 units, styled as brick Victorian rowhomes, townhomes, and semidetached homes. With a style change, came a name change. What once were named the Ellen Wilson Dwellings, the once-realized vision of the Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes, became The Townhomes on Capitol Hill. The homes and area around the Townhomes resemble a historic Victorian neighborhood, rather than public housing. Ellen’s aspiration and ambition for demolishing unsanitary, ramshackle alley housing and replacing it with new, stable housing for the lower income residents that resided there was finally realized over eighty years later. Today, a resident or visitor of the thriving Townhomes might not realize the link between the homes and the former First Lady, even though one of the main streets is named “Ellen Wilson Place.”⁸⁴

Though it may not be obvious on first glance, Ellen’s legacy of social reform lived though revitalized public housing in Washington, D.C., and socially active First Ladies.

⁸³ Stephanie Mencimer, “Building Blocks: Architect Amy Weinstein Is Redesigning Capitol Hill One Block at a Time,” *Washington City Paper*, October 25, 1996.

⁸⁴ <http://www.cnu.org/resources/projects/townhomes-capitol-hill-2008>. For a deeper, ore in depth discussion of HOPE VI and the Ellen Wilson Redevelopment Corp, please see *Interim Assessment of the HOPE VI Program: Case Study of Ellen Wilson Dwellings in Washington, DC, Final Report*, by Abt. Associates. <http://www.abtassoc.org/reports/2001409176851.pdf>

While Ellen's legacy as First Lady has been reduced to a few lines in the history books, those lines rarely detail any lasting legacies of this underestimated First Lady. Often, her activist efforts are completely excluded. In the words of Charlotte Hopkins, "Instances of her courtesy, her kindness, her thoughtfulness, crown upon me, revealing the beautiful nature under the quiet, retiring, simple manner, always forgetting herself, always full of thought for others."⁸⁵ Overall, Ellen's presence in Washington, D.C., has been sustained long after her death with the legacy she left behind in social reform and association with public housing.

⁸⁵ Hopkins, "Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes," *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 4.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

The slums of Washington, D.C., had become an increasingly hazardous and unsanitary area of habitation for those living there in 1913-1914. Despite previous efforts, it would be First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson's public involvement with cleaning up the slums that ultimately prompted urban renewal in the slums, which led to changing the perception of the First Lady role. Though not apparent at the time, Ellen's work with the slums became significant and successful with regard to the public housing that existed in her name, and still exists, though in a different form. Ellen's public involvement was significant as previous First Ladies had not been outwardly active in social reform, prompting Ellen to be viewed as an early policymaker and ensuring Ellen's legacy for decades to come.¹ Though the Alley Dwelling Act she lobbied for was not an initial success in creating more sanitary housing, her ultimate goal of giving the poor of the slums better housing was realized. Public housing, committees, and a street that bear her name even today bear witness to the lasting influence this First Lady had on changing the face of the Washington, D.C., slums.

Ellen is deserving of a significant place in history for her life-long involvement in social reform, culminating in the noteworthy changes in recasting the alley dwellings. As Charlotte Hopkins wrote memorializing Ellen, "Her loss is an irreparable one to our

¹ Robert P. Watson, "The 'White Glove Pulpit': A History of Policy Influence by First Ladies," *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (Spring, 2001): 13.

Washington work and yet from it may rise a tide of feeling and impetus to woman's work which will roll in great waves over the country, and future generations will bless the name and memory of Ellen A. Wilson."²

² Charlotte Hopkins, "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson," *The Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (November 1914): 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Unpublished

Hagner, Isabella. Unpublished memoirs. Office of the Curator, the White House.

Rome Area Heritage Foundation. Ellen Louise Axson Wilson Historical Marker. Myrtle Hill Cemetery. City of Rome, Georgia.

Samuel Edward Axson sermons. MS 36. The Georgia Historical Society Library and Archives. Savannah, Georgia.

Published

1840 U.S. Census, Liberty County, Georgia. Population schedule, p. 191 (penned).
Slave schedules, 1850 U.S. Census, Liberty County, Georgia. Population schedule, District 15, p. 6 (penned).

1860 U.S. Census, Edgefield County, South Carolina, Beech Island. Population schedule, p. 16 (penned).

Abt Associates, Inc. *An Historical and Baseline Assessment of HOPE VI*. 1996.

“Along the Color Line.” *The Crisis* 11, no. 1 (November 1915): 7-12.

“Alley Dwelling Act, 1914,” *The Congressional Record* 63 (September 25, 1914): 310.
With thanks to Senator Saxby Chambliss’ office and Debbie Cannon, who found this bill in their congressional database.

“Annual Report—Women’s Department.” *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 2-9.

Axson, Stockton. *Brother Woodrow: A Memoir of Woodrow Wilson*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Baker, Ray Stannard. *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters. Princeton, 1890-1910*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1927.

Bicknell, Grace Vawter. *The Inhabited Alleys of Washington, D.C.* Washington, D.C.: Committee on Housing, Woman’s Welfare Department, National Civic Federation, 1912.

- Bicknell, Mrs. Ernest P. "The Home-Maker of the White House: Mrs. Woodrow Wilson's Social Work in Washington." *The Survey* 33, no. 1, (October 1914-March 1915): 19-22.
- Cable, George Washington. *The Negro Question*. Edited by Arlin Turner. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1958.
- Current Opinion*. "The New Mistress of the White House." March 1913.
- Daggett, Mabel Potter. "Woodrow Wilson's Wife." *Good Housekeeping Magazine*, March 1913: 316-323.
- Daniels, Jonathan. *The End of Innocence*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1954.
- Daniels, Josephus. *The Wilson Era: Years of Peace, 1910-1917*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944.
- Eighth Annual Report of the Association for the Religious Instruction of the Negroes, in Liberty County, Georgia; Together with the address to the association by the president the Rev. I.S.K. Axson*. Savannah: Printed by Thomas Purse, 1843.
- Elliott, Margaret Axson. *My Aunt Louisa and Woodrow Wilson*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944.
- Grayson, Cary Travers. *Woodrow Wilson: An Intimate Memoir*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.
- Harvey, Susan. "Ending confusion on where what is in Rome." *Rome News-Tribune*. September 5, 1999.
- Hopkins, Charlotte. "Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes." *The Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (February 1915): 17-19.
- "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson." *The Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (November 1914): 2-4.
- Lang, Laura. "Dream City." *Washington City Paper*. April 16-22, 1999.
- Loeb, Vernon. "After Three Decades, The Bulldozers Show Up; Rebuilding of Ellen Wilson Dwellings Begins." *The Washington Post*. April 3, 1996.
- Mead, Marcia. "The Ellen Wilson Homes; Nation Wide Movement for a Fitting Memorial in Washington to the Wife of the President." *The Real Estate Magazine*, September 1915, 51-59.

- Mencimer, Stephanie. "Building Blocks: Architect Amy Weinstein Is Redesigning Capitol Hill One Block at a Time." *Washington City Paper*. October 25, 1996.
- McAdoo, Eleanor Wilson. *The Woodrow Wilsons*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937.
- "Opinion." *The Crisis* 9, no. 3 (January 1915): 119-127.
- Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. Edited by Arthur S. Link and David W. Hirst. 11 vols. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967-1980.
- Parks, Lillian Rogers. *My Thirty Years Backstairs At The White House*. New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1961.
- Powers, William F. "A Housing Complex D.C. Forgot: Group Seeks to Transform Abandoned Ellen Wilson Dwellings." *The Washington Post*. August 22, 1992.
- "On Capitol Hill, A Fight Over Housing Blight; Plan to Rebuild Long- Neglected Ellen Wilson Dwellings Gains Momentum—and Opposition." *The Washington Post*. June 5, 1993.
- Riis, Jacob August. *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among The Tenements of New York*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons: 1890.
- Roosevelt, Eleanor. *The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1961. Reprinted, Irwindale, California: G.K. Hall, 1984.
- Slave schedules, 1860 U.S. Census, Chatham County, Georgia. Population schedule, City of Savannah, Enumeration District [ED] 3, p. 58 (penned).
- Slave schedules, 1850 U.S. Census, Clarke County, Georgia. Population schedule, Athens District, p. 25 (penned).
- Slave schedules, 1860 U.S. Census, Clarke County, Georgia. Population schedule, Athens, District 216, p. 66 (penned).
- The Atlanta Constitution*. "Marriage in Savannah." June 26, 1885.
- The Day*. "These Two Girls Form First Firm of Women Architects in New York City." March 19, 1914.
- The New York Times*. "Broke Office Rule for Mrs. Wilson." November 1, 1913.
- The New York Times*. "Cleansing Capital's Slums." May 23, 1913.
- The New York Times*. "Memorial for Mrs. Wilson." March 3, 1915.

The New York Times. “Mrs. W.A. Hopkins Dies in Bay State: ‘Grand Old Lady’ of Washington Knew Every President From the Time of Lincoln.” September 8, 1935.

The New York Times. “Sanitary Housing Plan.” June 4, 1904.

The New York Times. “Slavery as a War Force.” December 7, 1863.

The New York Times. “The So-Called Southern Confederacy—Its Doom Already Sealed.” October 1, 1863.

The New York Times. “Mrs. Woodrow Wilson.” August 7, 1914.

The New York Times. “Mrs. Wilson Aids School.” April 30, 1913.

The New York Times. “Mrs. Wilson in Civic Work.” March 20, 1913.

The New York Times. “Mrs. Wilson in Civic Work: Attends Meeting for Mountain Whites.” March 27, 1913.

The New York Times. “Mrs. Wilson’s School Gift.” January 25, 1914.

The New York Times. “Mrs. Wilson to Aid.” November 3, 1913.

The New York Times. “Mrs. Wilson Visits Sick.” April 27, 1913.

The Washington Bee. “In A Worthy Cause.” April 1, 1916.

The Washington Herald. “Congress in Brief.” August 7, 1914.

The Washington Herald. “Flats to Rent for \$6 a Month.” May 30, 1913.

The Washington Herald. “Impetus Given Fight On Slums.” May 28, 1913.

The Washington Herald. “Miss Jessie Wilson, Second Daughter of the President, to Wed Francis B. Sayre, of New York.” July 3, 1913.

The Washington Herald. “Mistress of the White House Was Radiant Beauty of the South.” March 5, 1913.

The Washington Herald. “Nation Mourns Loss of First Lady of Land; Death Shock Capital.” August 7, 1914.

The Washington Herald. “Society Enters Alley Crusades.” May 26, 1913.

The Washington Herald. “Support Given Borland Bill.” March 8, 1914.

- The Washington Herald*. "Underwood and Palmer Accompany Mrs. Wilson On Visit To City Slums." June 4, 1913.
- The Washington Herald*. "Virginia Labor Men Mourn for Mrs. Wilson." August 8, 1914.
- The Washington Herald*. "Wife of President in Slumming Party." May 16, 1913.
- The Washington Post*. "Civic Workers' Report." January 13, 1916.
- The Washington Post*. "Elimination of Unsightly Areas Here Is Declared Necessary." September 26, 1943.
- The Washington Post*. "Fight for Slum Bill." January 25, 1914.
- The Washington Post*. "Helps Civic Workers." November 19, 1913.
- The Washington Post*. "Mrs. Wilson Dead After Long Illness." August 7, 1914.
- The Washington Post*. "Mrs. Wilson Will Speak." May 19, 1913.
- The Washington Post*. "Not A Civic Speaker." May 20, 1913.
- The Washington Post*. "'Rid City of Alleys'." June 17, 1913.
- The Washington Post*. "The Senate, Respecting Her Dying Wish, Passes Mrs. Wilson's Alley Slums Bill." August 7, 1914.
- The Washington Post*. "Visits the City's Poor." March 27, 1913.
- The Washington Times*. "Commissioners to Ask Special Bills. December 31, 1913.
- The Washington Times*. "Favor Streets in Slum Section." July 7, 1913.
- The Washington Times*. "Want \$100,000 to Fight Slum Evil." May 29, 1913.
- "Town Planning and Housing: The Ellen Wilson Memorial Homes." *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 3 (1915): 352-357.
- Wood, Edith Elmer. "Four Washington Alleys." *Survey* 31 (December 6, 1913): 250-252.
- "Work Done in the Federal Building." *The Bulletin* 1, no. 1 (May 1913): 2-4.

Secondary Sources

- American First Ladies: Their Lives and Legacies*. Edited by Lewis L. Gould. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996.
- Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961*. New York: Quill/William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990.
- *Nellie Taft: The Unconventional First Lady of the Ragtime Era*. New York: William Morrow, 2005.
- Barnes, William R. "A Battle for Washington: Ideology, Racism, and Self-Interest in the Controversy over Public Housing, 1943-1946." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 50 (1980): 452-483.
- Beasley, Maureen H., Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds. *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing, 2001.
- Black, Allida M. and Mary Jo Blinker. *Fundamental Freedoms: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Brookline, Massachusetts: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc., 2010.
- Borchert, James. *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970*. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1982.
- "The Rise and Fall of Washington's Inhabited Alleys: 1852-1972." *Records of the Columbia History Society, Washington, D.C.* 71/72 (1971/1972): 267-288.
- Burns, Lisa M. "Ellen Axson Wilson: A Rhetorical Reassessment of a Forgotten First Lady." In *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Molly Meijer Wertheimer, 79-101. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, Inc., 2004.
- *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of the Presidential Wives*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008.
- Caroli, Betty Boyd. *First Ladies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Cashman, Sean Dennis. *America In The Glided Age*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- Chyphers, Christopher J. *The National Civic Federation and the Making of a New Liberalism, 1900-1915*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

- Conway, Alan. *The Reconstruction of Georgia*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1966.
- Cook, Blanche Wiesen. *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume One: 1884-1933*. New York: Viking, 1992.
- *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume Two: 1933-1938, The Defining Years*
New York: Viking, 1999.
- DeSantis, Vincent P. *The Shaping of Modern America: 1877-1920*. 2nd ed. Arlington Heights, Illinois: Forum Press, Inc., 1989.
- Desmond, Jerry R. *Georgia's Rome: A Brief History*. Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2008.
- Dubovoy, Sina. *Ellen A. Wilson: The Woman Who Made a President*. New York: Nova Publications, 2004.
- Edwards, Rebecca. *New Spirits: Americans In The Gilded Age, 1865-1903*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Ellis, Edward Robb. *Echoes of Distant Thunder: Life in the United States, 1914-1918*. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1975.
- Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988.
- "Rights and the Constitution in Black Life during the Civil War and Reconstruction." *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 3, The Constitution and American Life: A Special Issue (December 1987): 863-883.
- Fulmer, Hal W. "The Defiant Legacy: Southern Clergy And A Rhetoric Of Redemption For The Reconstruction South." PhD diss. Louisiana State University, 1985.
- Gillette, Howard. *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Grantham, Dewey W. *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983.
- Green, Cleveland M. "Prejudices and Empty Promises: Woodrow Wilson's Betrayal of the Negro, 1910-1919." *The Crisis* 87, no.9 (November 1980), 380-388.
- Hannold, Elizabeth. "'Comfort and Respectability': Washington's Philanthropic Housing Movement." *Washington History* 4, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1992/1993): 20-39.

- Harris, Bill. *The First Ladies Fact Book*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Inc., 2005.
- Hood, Ernie." Dwelling Disparities: How Poor Housing Leads to Poor Health." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 113, no. 5 (May 2005): A310-A317.
- Johnson, Joan Marie. *Southern Women at the Seven Sister Colleges: Feminist Values and Social Activism, 1875-1915*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.
- Johnson, Ronald. "Black and White Apart: The Community Center in the District of Columbia." *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 52 (1989): 12-28.
- Lash, Joseph P. *Eleanor: The Years Alone*. Old Saybrook, Connecticut: Konecky & Konecky, 1972.
- Link, Arthur S. "Woodrow Wilson: The American as Southerner." *The Journal of Southern History* 36, no.1 (February 1970): 3-17.
- Link, William A. *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.
- Mathews, Donald G. *Religion in the Old South*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- McElwee, Bobby G. *Floyd County, Georgia*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 1998.
- McGerr, Michael. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. New York: Free Press, 2003.
- Miller, Kristie. *Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson's First Ladies*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010.
- O'Donnell, Edward T. "Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis." *The Public Historian* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 7-26.
- O'Reilly, Kenneth. "The Jim Crow Policies of Woodrow Wilson." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* no.17 (Autumn 1997): 117-119.
- "Remembering William Monroe Trotter: The First and Only Black Man to Be Thrown out of the Oval Office." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 46 (Winter 2004-2005): 50-51.

- Seale, William. *The President's House: A History: Volume 2*. Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1986.
- Shay, Mitchell. *Fenians, Freedmen, and Southern Whites: Race and Nationality In The Era of Reconstruction*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2007.
- Sosna, Morton. "The South in the Saddle: Racial Politics during the Wilson Years." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 30-49.
- Taylor, Dorceta E. *The Environment and the People in American Cities, 1600-1900s: Disorder, Inequality, and Social Change*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Ward, David. "The Progressives and the Urban Question: British and American Responses to the Inner City Slums 1880-1920." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 9, no. 3 (1984): 299-314.
- Watson, Robert P. *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2000.
- "The 'White Glove Pulpit': A History of Policy Influence by First Ladies." *OAH Magazine of History* 15, no. 3 (Spring, 2001): 9-14.
- Wiebe, Robert H. *The Search For Order 1877-1920*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.
- Wormser, Richard. *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. New York: Macmillan, 2003.
- Wright, Frances Saunders. *First Lady Between Two Worlds: Ellen Axson Wilson*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Websites

“Policy Advocate,”

http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/small_exhibition.cfm?key=1267&exkey=863&pagekey=909

“Home,”

<http://www.bettyboydcaroli.com/>

The Edith Bolling Wilson Birthplace Museum,

<http://edithbollingwilson.org/>

Committal Register for the Central State Hospital, Milledgeville, Georgia.

As referenced on the online database, “Genealogy of President Woodrow Wilson”
RootsWeb’s WorldConnect Project, http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=woodrow_wilson&id=I0055

Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System, National Park Service,

<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/index.html>

Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project. *My Day* column, December 21, 1943.

http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1943&_f=md056673

Townhomes on Capitol Hill,

<http://www.cnu.org/resources/projects/townhomes-capitol-hill-2008>