Part I

TO THE PRESIDENCY
Chapter One

WILSON THE MAN

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Birth and Early Childhood

Woodrow Wilson was born shortly before midnight on December 28, 1856 in the small town of Staunton, Virginia, a heavily Scotch-Irish area in the Shenandoah Mountains. Wilson was the third of four children born to the Reverend Joseph Ruggles Wilson and Janet Woodrow Wilson. The first of two sons, Wilson was doted on by his parents and his two older sisters; Marion, born in 1851, and Anne, born in 1853. Wilson’s younger brother, Joseph, was born in 1867. Wilson’s father was minister at Staunton’s First Presbyterian Church and Wilson was a child of the manse in many respects. Not only was his father a minister in the Presbyterian Church, so were his maternal grandfather and a maternal uncle, James Woodrow. Indeed, Janet Wilson’s family could brag numerous Presbyterian notables in Britain.

While Staunton was Wilson’s birthplace, it was not his home for long. Wilson would spend his childhood in Georgia and the Carolinas as his father moved from one church to another as his career waxed and then waned. In 1858 Joseph accepted a call by the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. A larger more prestigious church in a larger more prominent town than Staunton, Wilson’s new church home would be the family’s home for 12 years. His first memories were formed in Augusta. In November 1860, Wilson remembered, he heard a man running down the street yelling that Abraham Lincoln had been elected and there would be a war. The Wilson family supported the Confederacy. Although not a slave owner himself, Joseph and his family benefitted in both Staunton and Augusta from slaves and, perhaps, free black servants hired by the congregation to work in the manse. Joseph supported slavery from his pulpit, joined a local home defense unit during the war, and traveled to Richmond, the Confederate capital, to inspect hospitals. His Augusta church was used by the Confederate Army as a field hospital and as a holding pen for Union prisoners-of-war.
One cannot help but wonder how seeing wounded, dying, and dead soldiers may have affected the young Tommy Wilson, although historian John Milton Cooper notes that Wilson later claimed “there was no more glorious way to die than in battle” and Cooper notes “if the Civil War left an imprint on the boy or the man, it was buried so deep as to be imponderable (Cooper 2009: 18). On the other hand, in the same conversation with his aide Colonel Edward House, in which Wilson referred to dying in battle as “glorious,” he also noted that war was economically “ruinous.” This reflected another part of his experience growing up in the wartime and post-war south, seeing the destruction of the defeated Confederacy close-up and living through both Reconstruction and the beginnings of the New South’s movement to rebuild and to industrialize the region. Indeed, Wilson’s experience as a boy is unique among American presidents. While the United States has had many veterans as their chief executive and Andrew Jackson saw war as a youth, only Wilson saw war first hand as a child and on the losing side as well. It did not make him a partisan of the “Lost Cause.” He later remarked how because he loved the south, he was glad it lost the war. Arthur Link noted that although Wilson “was a southerner” he “failed to act and think like a southerner” and “in his strident affirmation of American nationalism and condemnation of sectionalism, indeed went far toward repudiating identification of the South,” (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 27, 113). This point can be easy to overstate, as Link in fact may have. Wilson did not reject the south, but as Cooper notes, he was “inoculated against the larger environment around him” and his family did “not have deep roots” in the region (Cooper 2009: 23). In short, Wilson rose above a regional partisanship although in college he did sometimes argue with northern classmates over regional politics.

Wilson’s education in Augusta was somewhat irregular in part due to the disruption of life in the south during and after the war, but also because Wilson may have suffered from a learning disability. What is known is that he did not learn the alphabet until he was nine years old and did not learn to read until he was about twelve. The Civil War disrupted schools throughout the south, and the region had lagged behind New England and the Midwest in establishing public schools even before the war. After the war Wilson enrolled in Joseph T. Derry’s “select classical institution” where he struggled with some of his lessons. His father added his own efforts by taking Wilson on trips to places in the area, such as workshops and factories, then having his son write an essay about what he had seen. If Joseph felt that Woodrow had not used a correct term he would press the boy to find the right word. The rest of Wilson’s family also did their best to educate him: his mother, his Aunt Marion, and his sisters all worked with him. Wilson, however, struggled to learn even the basics, although he loved being read to. His father revealed some of his frustration when he remarked that if they could not make a scholar out of his son, at least they could make him a gentleman (Baker 1927a: 42–3, 59–60; Weinstein 1981: 14–15).

The Reverend Wilson’s efforts and Woodrow’s struggles have prompted a debate among historians over possible cause and effect. Wilson spun a tall tale for reporter William Bayard Hale, producer of Wilson’s 1912 campaign biography, that Joseph delayed his son’s education because he did not want Woodrow to learn about the world first from books, but rather from the father. Alexander and Juliette George rejected this idea and cast the father as the villain in the son’s life in one of the most controversial theories about Wilson. The Georges used Wilson’s relationship with his
friend and advisor Colonel Edward M. House to examine Wilson’s relationship with his father, and how that affected Wilson’s personality and policymaking. Joseph was a perfectionist tyrant in their telling, and young Tommy they claim refused to learn to read to defy the father the only way he knew how (George and George 1964: 7). The Georges see what they portray as Wilson’s unconscious rebellion as setting a pattern that he followed into adulthood: “throughout his life his relationships with others seemed shaped by an inner command never again to bend his will to another man’s,” (George and George 1964: 11). In contrast, John Mulder suggested that Wilson’s father “apparently was not particularly eager that his son learn to read” and so did not push him, the exact opposite of the Georges suggestion (Mulder 1978: 31). Wilson’s earliest major biographer, Ray Stannard Baker, quoted the reason Wilson himself gave: “Tommy himself was backward – ‘lazy’ he called himself,” (Baker 1927a: 36).

The current most popular explanation for Wilson’s early learning difficulty, which is in opposition to the Georges’, came from Professor of Neurology and Wilson biographer Edwin Weinstein, who argued that Wilson’s difficulties lay in a learning disability, specifically dyslexia. Weinstein noted that Wilson remained a very slow reader throughout his life, that he had tremendous difficulties learning to read German or French for his studies, that he struggled with basic math, and that he was only a “fair” speller (Weinstein 1981: 15–18). Weinstein’s explanation remains popular among more recent Wilson biographers, as it would explain a great deal about his education and his career. John Milton Cooper attributes the young Wilson’s difficulty in learning to read to physical problems, including poor vision, which may have gone undetected until he was an adult. However, he also notes that there is evidence to support Weinstein’s claims, such as Wilson’s quickly learning to write with his left hand as an adult after suffering semi-paralysis in his right hand. Cooper, however, notes that Wilson did well in Latin, Greek, and French in school, and learned shorthand, which may argue against the dyslexia thesis (Cooper 2009: 19–20).

Aside from formal educational subjects, Wilson also acquired some of his father’s sense of humor. Joseph was known as an incurable punster, and Wilson picked up the love of clever wordplay. Wilson not only enjoyed puns, but limericks, which he often repeated to friends. His favorite was:

For beauty I am not a star,
There are others more handsome by far.
But my face I don’t mind it,
For I am behind it,
It’s the people in front that I jar.

Dialect humor was another Wilson favorite, which included “darkie” jokes, told in an exaggerated black dialect. Cooper noted that these jokes betrayed “touches of ethnic and racial prejudice, though innocently intended.” Weinstein discusses Wilson’s love of humor in his family life, and how he “charmed” his daughters when they were children, but does not discuss the racial aspect of Wilson’s joking. Such humor was very popular at the time, and Wilson told such jokes to both family and friends to their enjoyment. Cooper is most likely correct in that they were meant
“innocently” and Wilson probably would have been surprised had someone told him they were offensive. Nonetheless, while Wilson’s humor does show a playful side of him that the public rarely saw, his love of dialect humor does illustrate how he had absorbed the racial culture of his time (Tumulty 1921: 476; Baker 1927b: 47–8; Smith 1966: 203; Weinstein 1981: 112–13; Cooper 2009: 68).

The Wilson family enjoyed singing in groups of family and friends and Woodrow was described as having a pleasant voice. Joseph also enjoyed playing billiards, which was a bit unusual for a Protestant minister in the south at the time, and his son had a table as an adult at Princeton and in the White House. Reverend Wilson also enjoyed “an occasional” Scotch whiskey, a taste shared by his son when Woodrow was an adult. Joseph also smoked heavily, a habit Woodrow did not share. Both men also enjoyed the company of women. Joseph was handsome and even enjoyed a relationship with another woman after his wife died, despite his elder son’s disapproval. Woodrow had an unsuccessful courtship before meeting his first wife and wrote passionate love letters to both his wives. He also had numerous long friendships with several women. In short, neither father nor son was a humorless prig and both enjoyed many of life’s pleasures, at least in moderation (Cooper 2009: 14).

What then, of the father’s influence on Wilson’s education? The Georges accurately noted that the father was a perfectionist in his efforts to teach his son. Baker, probably Wilson’s most sympathetic biographer, wrote that Joseph “never permitted the use of an incorrect word” in his son’s written essays (Baker 1927a: 37). Nonetheless, Joseph seems to have been a loving father with a sense of humor, and the two were close until the father’s death in his son’s home at the age of 80 in 1903.

It is also clear that Woodrow came to represent Joseph’s dreams of achieving respect and success in a career as the father’s career seemed to stall. In the autumn of 1870 the family moved to South Carolina as Joseph took a job at Columbia Theological Seminary as an instructor. The Reverend Wilson found his experience in Columbia frustrating and his ambition balked as he ran into battles with colleagues and students, often over what seemed to be petty concerns. For example, while at the seminary, Wilson also served as minister to Columbia’s First Presbyterian Church until resigning when the session indicated that they wanted a fulltime minister. Wilson then scheduled chapel at the seminary at the same time as the services at First Presbyterian. Reverend Wilson then insisted that students attend his Sunday services rather than those elsewhere. While this may have been an attempt by Joseph to keep the students from a minister he considered inferior or doctrinally unsound, it most likely was a question of ego. Mulder claims, “Wilson’s motivation was, no doubt, partly personal pique.” The students won their battle and Joseph resigned (Mulder 1978: 14–15).

In 1874, after not quite four years in Columbia, the Wilson’s moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, where Joseph accepted an offer from the city’s First Presbyterian Church. It was a small church, and the congregation often had problems paying their minister’s salary. Joseph’s career had peaked (Mulder 1978: 14–17). John Mulder notes that Joseph “attempted to deal with his personal failure” in two ways. First he used his Christian faith to trust that God had a purpose. But he also saw in his son “the opportunity to achieve the success that he had sought in vain” (Mulder 1978: 27). Cooper simply writes, “From Tommy’s late teens on, Joseph Wilson’s circumstances conspired to make his older son the main object of his hopes and dreams”
(Cooper 2009: 21). Of course, it is not unusual for a parent to see their child’s success in this way, and if Joseph encouraged his son’s success as a way to deal with his own failures, it seems not to have poisoned their relationship.

While considering Wilson’s education and religious upbringing it should not be forgotten that he had a happy childhood with friends and playmates. Even Wilson’s best biographers, such as Arthur Link and Cooper, pay only a bare minimum of attention to Wilson’s childhood apart from the role of his father and his education, in part because there is a lack of documentation. But Wilson’s “official” biographer and friend, Ray Stannard Baker, talked to Wilson about his childhood, and he interviewed members of Wilson’s family and some of his childhood friends. As a result, we can have a somewhat more balanced view of Wilson’s boyhood away from books and church. For example, Wilson was the leader and second baseman of the Lightfoot Baseball team, which met in the loft of the manse’s barn in Augusta. As Baker notes, “the chief decoration was a portrait in red of His Satanic Majesty, torn from an advertisement for devilled ham” (Baker 1927a: 45; Mulder 1978: 43). This is not the work of a boy who is lost in books and religion. Woodrow and his cousin, Jessie Bones, painted their faces with berry juice and pretended they were in James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales. He once skipped school to watch a circus parade, stuffing the back of his pants with cotton to pad the inevitable spanking that would come from his teacher, Mr. Derry (Baker 1927a: 44–5). In the margins of his school books one can still see the young Woodrow’s doodles: a troop train of soldiers from the Civil War, observation balloons (one flying a Confederate flag), and a greyhound named “Mountain Boy” that was the family pet. In other words, he had a normal childhood with friends and playmates and he occasionally got into trouble (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 1, 5–6).

While living in Columbia Wilson officially joined the Presbyterian Church by giving a confession of faith along with two other boys. This was standard Presbyterian practice, but there is no doubt that part of the influence on Woodrow from his father was religious. Wilson adopted his father’s southern Presbyterian Calvinism without much, if any, question. He also continued his secular education, attending Charles Barnwell’s school where he studied, among his other courses, Latin and Greek.

Of more interest to historians was Wilson’s coping mechanism for dealing with the normal disruptions and uncertainties of puberty; an active fantasy life centered on the sea. While living in Columbia and Wilmington the young man created imaginary fleets with himself as commander. Usually casting himself as a titled British officer, Wilson showed an affinity for his mother’s homeland that never left him. He also demonstrated a flair for creating organizations, as he not only created a fantasy fleet, he organized it into squadrons with names for all the officers and ships, sometimes using the names of friends and schoolmates. Once he created his own paper navy, Woodrow set sail in his imaginations, tracking down pirates and finding adventure. While living in Wilmington, Wilson also spent time visiting the docks and studying the ships (Baker 1927a: 60; Weinstein 1981: 19; Cooper 2009: 22).

Mulder places a bit more significance on this than do Wilson’s other biographers, referring to his organization of the “Royal United Kingdom Yacht Club” as “Wilson’s first constitution” and claims that it reflected the young man’s “desire for order and structure . . . a means of compensating for the sudden and unhappy move by the Wilson family to Wilmington” (Mulder 1978: 43). Other recent books emphasizing
the role of covenant theology on Wilson’s worldview have placed a similar emphasis on the Yacht Club fantasy (see Magee 2008 and Benbow 2010a). Weinstein refers to Wilson’s fantasy life as “normal features of intellectual growth” but places no significance on the theological aspect of constitutions (Weinstein 1981: 19). Link treats the episode in the same context as Weinstein, as revealing his passion, even at an early age, for constitutional order (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 1, 56 n1). In contrast, Cooper mentions it in passing but assigns no special significance to Wilson’s fantasy life. It is tempting for a historian to find significance in an event early in a famous person’s life, but in this instance, the creation of a detailed constitution for an imaginary yacht club does fit a pattern Wilson repeated throughout his life, reaching its culmination with the League of Nations.

College

Wilson did not live in Wilmington long. In the 1873–74 school year he enrolled in Davidson College, a small Presbyterian school in Davidson, North Carolina. Wilson joined the campus debating club, the Eumenean Society, and the baseball team where he played centerfield. His grades were generally good despite poor preparation for some of his classes. He was initially put on probation in both Greek and mathematics, both of which he managed to pass. Wilson’s best marks came in logic and rhetoric, composition, English, and declamation (public speaking). He spent much of his time alone reading, even though he did have friends and remained active on campus. Wilson’s year at Davidson cemented his interest in debating clubs. He was very active in the Eumenean Society. He loved their discussions on books, the issues of the day, and about great men. He was a fan of British Prime Minister William Gladstone and kept a portrait of him over his desk. Wilson was already an effective public speaker as a young man, and he sought out the debating society not only at Davidson, but also later at Princeton and at the University of Virginia, where he attended law school. The life of the mind charmed Wilson, but it was a life he wanted to share with friends to discuss ideas and leaders (Baker 1927a: 73–6).

Only 16 years old, Wilson may have still been too immature to move away from home. He only studied at Davidson for one year before returning home suffering from “ill health,” which was probably homesickness according to Weinstein. Cooper writes that the reasons for Wilson leaving Davidson are “not clear” and Mulder simply refers to the years from 1872 to 1874 as “obviously a time of confusion and spiritual difficulty.” Baker blames Wilson’s leaving on his nearing a “physical breakdown” due to overwork, but as Weinstein notes, Wilson was not really in poor health. Baker, like other observers who knew Wilson late in his life, seems to have transposed Wilson’s poor health as a 60-year-old man with cardiovascular disease to the boy five decades before. White House physician and friend, Dr. Cary Grayson claimed that Wilson was “constitutionally . . . not . . . strong either as a youth, [or as] a young man.” Weinstein argues that Grayson was wrong, judging by how he appeared later in his life and suffering from cardiovascular disease. Instead, Wilson’s frequent health complaints, often of a generic “cold” reflected more of his mood than his health. When anxious or depressed, his mental state would be expressed as a physical ailment. This tendency was exacerbated by his overprotective mother, whose
letters to her son constantly expressed concerns over his health. Wilson later commonly joked about “how I clung to her (a laughed-at mamma’s boy) till I was a great big fellow,” but her constant flow of letters concerning his health did nothing to discourage his tendency to express stress as physical ailments. Cooper simply notes that later reports of Wilson’s ill health were probably inaccurate. Wilson’s classmates who later talked with Baker mention that he was quiet and studious, but not that he was in poor health. On the other hand, Wilson was young and had never been away from home for any length of time before, so this suggests that Weinstein is correct. Whatever the reason, Wilson only remained at Davidson for one year (Baker 1927a: 73–6; Grayson 1960: 80; Mulder 1978: 40; Weinstein 1981: 20–3; Cooper 2009: 18, 25).

Wilson returned to Wilmington to prepare for college, and to further lose himself in fantasies of naval heroics. He spent much of his time practicing shorthand, a skill he had studied hard to acquire and perfect beginning in 1872 while still in Columbia. Wilson studied the Graham shorthand system as a way to save time, and, probably, to help him deal with whatever learning disabilities made studying difficult for him. After he left Davidson, Wilson redoubled his efforts to master the difficult system, and between leaving Davidson in June 1874 and entering Princeton (then the College of New Jersey) in September 1875, he became proficient. For the rest of his life Wilson relied on shorthand while composing notes for articles, letters, and speeches. It also created some difficulties for later historians who needed to find translators for the archaic system (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 1, 10–11).

Wilson entered Princeton as a freshman in the Class of 1879. Officially non-denominational, it was nonetheless heavily tied to Presbyterianism. The first of many colleges in the United States founded by Presbyterians, the school numbered among its presidents such church notables as Jonathan Edwards and John Witherspoon. Every one of its presidents had been a Presbyterian minister. Wilson himself would be the first to break that tradition when he became Princeton’s President in 1902. Its reputation had declined over the years, but when Wilson enrolled the school’s President was James McCosh, a Scottish minister who was busily, and effectively, reforming the college. Recruiting better professors and better students as well as expanding such facilities as its library, McCosh was remaking the school into a real university. However, despite McCosh, Princeton was still not, in Cooper’s words, “academically demanding.” This allowed plenty of time and opportunity for Wilson to read, study, and discuss the books he was reading, and the young man leapt to take advantage of the opportunities. His four years at Princeton did much to shape the scholar and leader that emerged as a University President, as Governor, and then as President of the United States (Mulder 1978: 44; Cooper 2009: 25–7).

Wilson joined one of the two debating and literary societies at Princeton. His choices were Whig and Clio and he joined the former, which welcomed southern underclassmen and, more importantly, favored political topics in its debates. Whig provided Wilson with invaluable experience as well as pleasure. Among the topics he debated his first year was if Britain’s parliamentary system was superior to an American-style republic. Already fascinated by things British, Wilson returned to comparisons of the American and British systems again and again as a scholar. Whig taught lessons other than speaking in public and framing arguments. Princeton had banned the Greek letter fraternities that were rapidly growing on campuses around
the country, but Whig and Clio filled at least part of the same social role. They were self-governing, which allowed young men to experience and practice leadership roles among their peers. They provided ready-made friendships, and their secret rituals encouraged identification with a self-defined group. The schools’ “eating clubs” which not only provided meals, but, in many cases, a clubhouse, also acted as surrogate fraternities. Wilson joined “The Alligators” which was not among the more elite eating clubs. He must have enjoyed it though, as most of the members remained friends for the rest of their lives, Wilson included (Cooper 2009: 17).

In his sophomore year Wilson joined the new student newspaper, *The Princetonian*. He began writing letters and editorials and continued until his graduation. This not only gave Wilson valuable writing experience, but it reveals what issues were important to the young man. His first letter complained that little attention was paid on campus to oratory. Already a good speaker, Wilson no doubt wished for further chances to hone his skills, and to show them in public. This remained a major theme in Wilson’s writings in the paper: why were there not more chances for students to practice their public speaking, and to debate. Class work, of course, took up much of Wilson’s time. He still struggled with Greek, Latin and advanced mathematics, but devoting considerable effort to his work, he did well in all of his classes. He graduated in 1879, ranked thirty-eighth in his class of 167 (Cooper 2009: 28–9).

What did Wilson learn at Princeton, aside from his normal course of studies? As most undergraduates do, Wilson matured. He made friends, many of which lasted the rest of his life. His interest in politics, specifically how government formed and how they represented the will of the citizens, deepened. In 1879 he published an essay titled “Cabinet Government” in a Boston journal, the *International Review*. In it, Wilson discussed an idea that he would repeat in one form or another for decades, a desire to copy the parliamentary system of government debate in the United States. His experiences at Princeton – in classes, in Whig, in debates with friends and classmates – served to strengthen his belief that debating ideas openly was the most reliable way to determine and to shape the popular will, upon which government rested. Wilson felt so strongly about the power of open debate that in his senior year he refused to participate in a prestigious debate contest rather than take an assigned position, supporting a protective tariff, opposite Wilson’s actual belief. This incident not only revealed the strength of Wilson’s belief, but a stubborn streak, which he never lost. Abandoning a strongly felt position was unthinkable, even for something as minor as a college debate contest (Baker 1927a: 105; Cooper 2009: 30–2).

After graduating from Princeton, Wilson enrolled in the law school at the University of Virginia. He had already decided that he wanted to go into politics, setting his eyes upon the Senate where he could debate the major issues of the day. While at Princeton, he had hand-written several calling cards, which read “Thomas Woodrow Wilson. Senator from Virginia.” Then as now, many members of Congress were lawyers, so that seemed to be the most reliable route into politics. Wilson did not, interestingly enough, aim at being President. In part this may reflect his preference for a parliamentary style of government, where ruling parties had to defend their positions in debate or lose power. Of course, it could also simply reflect the reality of power in American politics at the time. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, political power in the United States lay with Congress, not with the President. Any
ambitious young man in 1879 thinking about entering politics would normally look to the national legislature rather than the presidency (Baker 1927a: 104).

Wilson enjoyed his time at Virginia, but this was despite his studies not because of them. He found the law to be tedious, noting in a letter to a friend, “The Law is indeed a hard taskmaster . . . [I am] swallowing the vast mass of its technicalities with as good a grace and as straight a face as an offended palate will allow” (Baker 1927a: 116). However, he used his time in Charlottesville to pursue his interest in public speaking and debate. He joined the Jefferson Debating Society as well as the Glee Club, the Chapel Choir and Phi Kappa Psi fraternity. It was while he was at Virginia that Wilson dropped his first name, Thomas, and began to go by his middle name, Woodrow. Some old childhood friends still called him Tommy through the rest of his life, but the rest of the world knew him as Woodrow. Even his own family would call him by his chosen name, although it should be noted that this especially pleased his mother, who liked seeing her family name so honored, telling him that she “wanted to call you Woodrow from the start.” Nonetheless, Wilson still occasionally used “T. Woodrow Wilson” as he got used to his new name (Cooper 2009: 36).

Falling in Love

Wilson also fell in love for the first time while in Virginia, with a cousin, Hattie Woodrow. Hattie lived in nearby Staunton where she was studying at the Augusta Female Seminary (now Mary Baldwin College). While Wilson was not necessarily shy, he would today be considered an introvert, and he seems to have had little serious experience courting the opposite sex. He had attended some social events in Wilmington, which led to occasional walks with a young woman. He later told his fiancée, Ellen Axson, that he “had never been without a sweetheart until I went to Princeton.” But these relationships, if that term is not overstating the case, seem to have probably been very casual, and his life at Princeton, Wilson himself described as “monastic.” In Charlottesville he participated when the glee club serenaded a young woman, but the young man avoided dances and other receptions. Wilson, however, had known Hattie since both were children and when Wilson graduated from Princeton and saw her again he fell in love. She seemed a perfect fit. As Weinstein noted “she was attractive, vivacious, popular, and a talented musician and singer.” Wilson loved her voice. Best of all, Wilson’s mother heartily approved. Unfortunately for Wilson, Hattie did not return the affection, at least to the same level. Wilson did not catch on that his cousin was uncomfortable with his ardency, a reflection of how little experience the young man had with women at that time. Unaware, or unwilling to admit that the depth of his feeling were unreturned, Wilson continued his suit, and began missing many of his classes to make the 40-mile trip to Staunton. When reprimanded by the university, Wilson looked to his parents for support. His father sided with the school, while Wilson’s mother expressed sympathy for her son (Weinstein 1981: 50; Cooper 2009: 36–8).

While still pursuing Hattie, Wilson left Virginia in the autumn of 1880, complaining of poor health; a lingering “cold.” As had happened when he left Davidson College, the “cold” was probably a manifestation of a combination of exhaustion
from a heavy school workload and homesickness. Wilson spent the next year in Wilmington, studying for the bar exam, writing letters to Hattie, and teaching his younger brother. Finally Wilson proposed marriage while at a dance with Hattie and she made her feelings, or lack of them, known. A desperate Wilson spent the night writing a letter asking the young woman to reconsider. She refused, and he returned home, both wiser and sadder. This would not be the last time that Wilson turned to his skill with words in his efforts to woo his love (Weinstein 1981: 50–1).

Wilson’s year living in Wilmington was “dismal” according to Weinstein. Depressed over the failure of his romance, Wilson put off taking his bar exam. Wilson again complained about his health, noting that his digestion was “out of gear.” Mulder also notes that Wilson complained of his poor health at this time, although he agrees with Weinstein that “Wilson’s illness was at least in part psychosomatic” (Mulder 1978: 68). However, perhaps pressed by his father, Wilson moved to Atlanta and opened a law firm with a friend from law school, Edward Renick. Wilson took the bar exam in October 1882 and passed easily, his performance in the oral exams described as “not short of brilliant.” Renick and Wilson’s law firm did not, despite Wilson’s performance in his exam, prosper. Atlanta was in the process of rebuilding and as a center of the rebuilding “New South” the city was a southern Mecca for ambitious young men. As a result, the two partners were in competition with numerous other young lawyers and business was difficult to find. Wilson spent his time reading and finishing a draft of a book titled Government by Debate, which reflected his preference for a parliamentary form of government. The book was not well-written and was never published, but Wilson would continue thinking about how a British-style system might work in the United States. Wilson also spent time in the gallery of the Georgia Senate, where he was disappointed by what he saw. Only Baker discusses this experience, although Weinstein mentions it in passing. Baker attributes some of Wilson’s dissatisfaction with his time in Atlanta to his disappointment in what he witnessed from the gallery. As a student, Wilson had admired the British parliament and the debating skills of men like William Gladstone, or the US Senate and men such as Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. After indulging in dreams of joining their ranks and meetings of great minds, “here before him was the crude and stumbling reality” (Baker 1927a: 150–1; Weinstein 1981: 53–5; Cooper 2009: 38–9).

Despite the disappointments, Atlanta proved to be a turning point in Wilson’s life. As Cooper noted, Wilson “might have enjoyed himself in [the city], but did not.” He did begin healing his broken heart, spending time with the pretty young niece of his landlord, Katie Mayrant. Wilson claimed it was casual, that they “romped” together, but it may not have been quite as casual as Wilson later claimed. At any rate, the relationship did not lead to an official romantic entanglement, but it may have helped Wilson get over his feelings for Harriet. The time spent in Atlanta also convinced Wilson that the law was not the right career, and he decided to return to graduate school to prepare for a career as a college professor. This was not an easy decision for Wilson to make, as it appeared to mean giving up his chosen goal of entering politics. There were many lawyers in Congress, but not many professors. Instead, Wilson decided to go back to school, this time to the new German-style University in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins. If he could not use a law career to enter politics, he would find another way to influence and shape government, by studying
and writing about it. As he later told his fiancée, Ellen Axson, “I have a passion for interpreting great thoughts to the world” (Cooper 2009: 39–40, 51).

Graduate School and Marriage

Wilson picked Baltimore’s Johns Hopkins because his uncle, James Woodrow, recommended it. Dr Woodrow had earned his PhD from Germany’s Heidelberg University and knew that Johns Hopkins was built on a German model, emphasizing a research-oriented graduate program. Wilson applied for a fellowship in April 1883, but was told that no more slots were available. His father agreed to support his son and Wilson began preparations to return to school (Cooper 2009: 41). In the meantime, Wilson continued what little work he could find as a lawyer. In April 1883, even as he began applying to Johns Hopkins, he travelled to Rome, Georgia to manage an estate left by one of his maternal uncles. While in Rome, Wilson attended a Sunday service lead by one of his father’s friends, the Reverend Samuel Edward Axson. During the service, Wilson was entranced by a pretty young woman sitting up front, Ellen Axson, the minister’s daughter. Following the southern tradition, Wilson made a Sunday night call on his father’s friend. After making polite small talk, Wilson made a point of inquiring about Reverend Axson’s daughter. Axson realized that the son of his friend had more on his mind than simply chatting with the older man, and made the introductions. Wilson returned to Rome in May and the young couple went for a carriage ride and for a short walk. The courtship was conducted as would have been expected for two children of respected ministers. Wilson addressed Ellen as “Miss Axson” and she called him “Mr Wilson.” They began to exchange letters, still maintaining the proper forms of propriety, but Wilson later noted how strong his emotions were, “Passion . . . had pretty much gotten the better of me” he recalled of their first date, and that soon thereafter he was “quite conscious that I was very much in love with my companion.” Ellen reciprocated Wilson’s feelings, remembering that she felt “a quiet little glow . . . tingling out of my very fingertips.” (Baker 1927a: 160–73; Weinstein 1981: 56–7; Cooper 2009: 41–2).

Several historians have examined Wilson and Ms Ellen Axson’s relationship and marriage. Frances Wright Saunders’ book, Ellen Axson Wilson: First Lady Between Two Worlds (1985) is the only full-length biography of Ellen, while Kristie Miller’s Ellen and Edith: Woodrow Wilson’s First Ladies (2010) examines Wilson’s relationship with both of his wives. Saunders goes into detail about how the young couple met and how their relationship grew, but, while Woodrow and Ellen fell in love soon after they met, getting married was not as simple as Wilson asking and Ellen (or Reverend Axson) accepting. Ellen’s mother, Margaret Jane Hoyt Axson, had died in November 1881 soon after giving birth to Ellen’s youngest sibling, Margaret. Ellen, only 23 when she met Wilson, was now the elder woman of her household. She took care of her father and two brothers, Stockton, age 14, and Edward, aged five, after their mother died. Moreover, Reverend Axson began to suffer from severe bouts of depression. Margaret was given to an aunt to raise. Ellen had turned down previous marriage proposals and may well have feared spending her life taking care of her father and siblings rather than starting her own family. Ellen was educated, she attended at the Rome Female College, and intelligent. Known as a “man-hater”
because of her pickiness about her beaus, she desired a husband who was also talented and intelligent. As Saunders notes, “Ellen’s adamant belief [was] marriage should be for mutual self-improvement.” Into this gap stepped Woodrow Wilson (Saunders 1985: 42–5; Cooper 2009: 43).

Now addressing each other as “Miss Ellie Lou” and “Woodrow” the two continued their romance through the summer of 1883. A chance meeting in Asheville, North Carolina gave Wilson the opportunity he had been waiting for. Ellen was travelling back to Rome from a trip to North Carolina to visit family, and Wilson was in Asheville with his family. While walking down the street Wilson chanced to look into the window of a hotel lobby, where Ellen was sitting waiting for her train. Recognizing the woman he loved Wilson rushed in and convinced her to stay another few days before he left for Johns Hopkins. She agreed and the young couple went to visit Wilson’s family. Wilson proclaimed his love and asked Ellen to marry him, and she agreed. They would get married as soon as he finished his studies and had begun a new career as a college professor (Saunders 1985: 6–8; Cooper 2009: 43–4).

Wilson asked Ellen to marry him despite his mother’s objections. Mrs Wilson noted that her son’s financial prospects were uncertain since he was returning to school, although, as Weinstein noted, she had approved of Wilson’s courtship of Hattie Woodrow when Wilson’s financial status was no better. Weinstein noted that perhaps Mrs Wilson thought if Wilson married a cousin, then the mother could remain closer to her son than if he married an outsider. Perhaps she sensed that Ellen was more independent than Hattie. Regardless of his mother’s objections, Wilson followed his heart and proposed to Ellen. Wilson’s mother’s disapproval may have affected how the family reacted at first. Of Woodrow’s three siblings, only his younger brother immediately sent the young couple his congratulations. Wilson heard from his father a week later, although Saunders notes that Joseph “could hardly have been more pleased with Woodrow’s choice” and that he quickly sent Ellen a warm note. However, Joseph also warned his son not to let his romance interfere with his studies. Considering how Wilson allowed his pursuit of Hattie to interfere with his classes at Virginia, Joseph’s warning was not unreasonable. The father warmed up to Ellen quickly, however, and Wilson’s mother finally followed suit two months later (Weinstein 1981: 58–9; Saunders 1985: 31).

Wilson arrived at Johns Hopkins a newly engaged man, and quickly settled in. The centerpiece of his graduate training was the weekly seminar in which the graduate students and faculty gathered around a large table while students read their papers for discussion. While this seemed to be a perfect fit for Wilson’s interests, he was quickly disillusioned. Cooper noted, “once more Wilson could have been happier than he was. The fault again lay more with him than with the institution, but not entirely.” No one there, he complained to Ellen, cared about “style.” Papers were presented in dry “scientific” form in the German style. Wilson’s strength lay in how he presented his insights and ideas, rather than in the depth of his research. At Johns Hopkins, scholars were supposed to pursue detailed, painstaking research that would, slowly over time, build an edifice of knowledge. For Wilson, words were more than a utilitarian tool; they were an art form. Now he was expected to use words sparingly and plainly. The drudgery of the massive amount of reading expected in graduate school also grated on Wilson, who still read very slowly. Weinstein quotes Wilson’s comment that “my chief ground of indictment against my professors is that they give
a man infinitely more than he can digest” and his economics professor was “stuffed full of information but apparently much too full to have any movement.” Repeating his now established pattern, when under stress Wilson complained of “colds” and digestive problems, but he worked diligently on his coursework (Weinstein 1981: 60–1; Cooper 2009: 45).

Frustrated and wanting to concentrate on constitutional studies, Wilson went to the head of the department, Herbert Baxter Adams, and talked to him openly about his unhappiness in the department. Adams graciously, and perhaps sensing Wilson’s potential, allowed his student to design his own studies. Wilson began working on what would become his first book, *Congressional Government*. Wilson argued that the way in which the US Congress operated discouraged true debate, because most of the important business was conducted in small, secretive committees run by autocratic committee chairs. In contrast, in a parliamentary system, which Wilson favored, debate was conducted in the open and the government had to win public support or fall. The book was at times uneven in its writing, and Wilson did not seem to consider how the United States might switch from a Congressional committee system to a parliamentary one, but the book shows Wilson’s continuing interest in debate and discussion as the key to effective government (Mulder 1978: 76–7).

Wilson was a young man in a hurry while at Johns Hopkins, not only to complete his studies and find a job, but, more importantly, to get married. He considered abandoning his quest for his doctorate and taking a teaching position. That way he and Ellen could get married. Ellen, meanwhile, was enjoying a newfound sense of independence. Her family situation had changed in the spring of 1884. Her father, now confined to a mental hospital due to his increasing depression, died suddenly. Many historians assume it was a suicide. Wilson rushed to Ellen’s side to help her through the sudden loss. Reverend Axson had, however, left Ellen an estate worth $12,000, which would equal about $250,000 in 2010. Ellen now had the means to study art at the Art League in New York City and to send her brothers to college (Saunders 1985: 47).

Wilson had “mixed feelings” about Ellen’s desire to improve her already considerable artistic talent. He was disappointed by “the indefinite postponement of our marriage” but nonetheless, he rode with her on the train to New York City and saw that she was settled in at the school on West Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. Ellen worked on improving her painting, which favored impressionistic landscapes. She also took advantage of her time in New York, exploring different churches, seeing plays, and spending time with other young artists. She and Wilson wrote to each other daily, professing their love and planning their future together. Ellen also teased Wilson’s jealous nature. She wore her engagement ring, but not on her ring finger and several young men in New York clearly showed their interest in her. Wilson did become jealous, and while he did not demand that she stop associating with other men, he did insist that she make her status as an engaged woman known to discourage would-be suitors. He travelled to New York to spend Christmas with Ellen in 1884. After a romantic week together Wilson returned to Baltimore to continue his studies (Saunders 1985: 47–55; Cooper 2009: 52–3).

The year 1885 was an eventful one for Wilson and Ellen. In January his first book, *Congressional Government*, was published. It soon began to gather favorable reviews, in Cooper’s words, “The book’s reception exceeded Wilson’s wildest dreams.” Even
as the positive reviews praised Wilson’s book, Ellen finished her studies in New York and moved back to Georgia to prepare for their wedding at the end of May. Wilson and Ellen were married at the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah. Because of Reverend Axson’s untimely death, it was a small ceremony for family and a few friends. The wedding was held in the manse instead of the chapel, and there were no flowers or music. Joseph Wilson and Ellen’s grandfather, the Reverend Stockton Keith Axson, jointly performed the ceremony. Afterward, the newlyweds left for a two-month honeymoon in Arden, North Carolina. By the time they headed back north, Ellen was pregnant. Weinstein notes how Ellen met Wilson’s need for a female companion, for companionship as well as on account of sexual desire. “Ellen Axson” he noted, “did far more for [Wilson] than relieve his loneliness and depressions . . . She gave him a better self, free of his mother’s gloom, apprehensions, and bitterness.” Baker agreed, “it is difficult to over-emphasize the determining importance of Wilson’s marriage . . . it is not too much to say that he found in his wife the ‘polar center’ of his existence.” This same dependence on a woman’s support would be a constant theme throughout Wilson’s life, with Ellen, with woman friends, and with his second wife Edith. But in 1885 that need focused entirely on Ellen. That September, Wilson began his first job as an associate professor of History and Political Economy at the new women’s college, Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania. With a new wife, a family on the way, his first book out, and his first professor’s job, at age 29 Woodrow Wilson’s adult life was on its way (Baker 1927a: 241; Weinstein 1981: 80–1; Saunders 1985: 62; Cooper 2009: 49–55).

New Professor

Wilson was probably not the best fit for Bryn Mawr. While he did not object to women’s education, his goal was to educate future leaders. In 1885 women only had the vote in three territories (Wyoming, Utah, and Washington) and were about to lose that right in two of them. Wilson complained that his students were intelligent, but too passive to engage, and he was not sure if this was because they were young women, or simply because they were undergraduates. He noted that they “never challenge my authority in any position I may take.” Nonetheless, he was a popular professor, largely because he was a captivating lecturer. He carefully prepared his lectures, using shorthand to take notes (Cooper 2009: 56).

The newlywed couple lived in a boarding house with several other professors’ families. In early 1886, Ellen was nearing the end of her first pregnancy and traveled to Gainesville, Georgia by the train. On April 14 she arrived at her Aunt Lou’s home (Louisa Cunningham Hoyt Brown). Two days later Ellen gave birth to their first daughter, Margaret Wilson. Six weeks later Wilson finished his doctorate at Johns Hopkins, using his book, Congressional Government, as his dissertation and easily passing the oral exam. He was officially awarded the degree in June, making Wilson the only president to date with an earned PhD. By the end of 1886 Ellen was pregnant again. Once again Ellen went to Georgia to stay with family. On August 28, 1887 she gave birth to Jessie Wilson (Saunders 1985: 68–74).

In the meantime Woodrow was looking for ways to make money to support his growing family. He began giving lectures at Johns Hopkins on Public Administration.
Wilson had also not entirely given up dreaming of working in politics, or at least going to Washington. In late 1887 he also attempted to find a job with the Grover Cleveland administration as an assistant Secretary of State. As a life-long Democrat, Wilson was overjoyed at Cleveland’s election in 1884 over Republican James G. Blaine. Wilson was over-reaching a bit in applying for this position, but not because of a lack of qualifications. With a doctorate in government and having passed the bar, Wilson more than met the minimum for a position in the State Department of the late nineteenth century. He was as qualified as the man who received the job, George L. Rives, a lawyer from New York. However, Wilson had no patronage connections, and the State Department position was a prime patronage spot. The attempt, however, shows that Wilson had not abandoned his goal of entering politics, although the incident is ignored by most of Wilson’s biographers. It also shows his impatient streak and his confidence; that a young man of 30 with no political connections could hope to win such a position (Baker 1927a: 266; Cooper 2009: 54).

Wilson settled back into teaching at Bryn Mawr, supporting his family, writing when he could, and looking for more opportunities to advance. In 1888 he resigned from Bryn Mawr to take a position as chair of History and Political Economy at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. He had to break his contract with Bryn Mawr to do so, claiming that they had not fulfilled their part of the contract by providing him with a promised assistant. Wilson was stretching the point to get out of a teaching job he no longer wanted. Any breaches by Bryn Mawr in the contract were, at most, minor and had both parties wanted to resolve the situation, they most likely could have done so. However, Wilson wanted to leave and the school did not want to keep a professor who no longer wanted to stay. At Wesleyan, Wilson received a salary of $2,500 for eight hours’ class work per week, and he was given leave to continue lecturing at Johns Hopkins. Wilson was blunt about the advantages of his new position, “The terms of this offer, coupled with the fact that at Wesleyan University my classes would be composed almost exclusively of men, who from the nature of the case are necessarily much more directly interested in the topics of Political Science than women are, have made me feel that to accept it would be both to secure more advantageous conditions of work and to widen my field of usefulness” (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 5, 743).

This was not Wilson’s finest moment as a professor, although most of Wilson’s biographers do not spend much time examining Wilson’s break with Bryn Mawr. Baker noted that Wilson was 31 years old in 1887, and his “impatience and discontent reached a climax.” Cooper repeats Wilson’s justification while Weinstein notes that both sides sought legal opinions and then Bryn Mawr agreed to release Wilson, implying that Wilson had a legitimate case. Whatever the merits of Wilson’s leaving Bryn Mawr, both the university and Wilson were probably better served by his moving to a new position. Baker interviewed several of Wilson’s students to get their opinion of Wilson as a professor at the woman’s college. Wilson’s former students tended to regard him as a brilliant lecturer, but complained that he did not want to discuss the lessons with his students and that he didn’t make an effort to understand the young women that made up his classes. As one noted, “He never liked teaching, as differentiated from lecturing” (Baker 1927b: 289–91; Weinstein 1981: 94; Cooper 2009: 59).
Wilson’s move to Wesleyan marked the beginning of some of his most productive years as a professor. Baker covers this period at greatest depth, but the details are the same regardless of which biographer the reader uses. Wilson was a talented and well-respected teacher, and he was writing some of his best books and articles. In 1889 he published a textbook, *The State*, which remained in use in political science classes for decades. He and Ellen made friends at the new school, despite their initial wariness at being surrounded by “Yankees” and they had a third daughter, Eleanor. The pregnancy was difficult for Ellen, so much so that she didn’t travel south to be with family for the delivery. As a result, Eleanor was the only of Wilson’s three daughters to be born in the north, and received much teasing from her older siblings for being a “Yankee.” Although they wanted a son, the Wilson’s agreed not to have any more children, or “Woodrow’s little annuals” as Joseph not unkindly put it. Wilson settled in at Wesleyan, at least for a little while. He wrote, worked in their garden, played with his daughters, and coached the school's football team. Meanwhile, friends at Princeton worked behind the scenes to find him a position there (Baker 1927a: 298–325; Cooper 2009: 59–63).

**Princeton**

Wilson achieved at least one of his career goals in the summer of 1889 when Princeton offered him a job teaching “Political Economy.” In contrast to how he left Bryn Mawr, Wilson asked to delay starting for one school year so as not to leave Wesleyan in the lurch. Wilson would begin in September 1890 at a starting salary of $3,000 a year and he could continue giving lectures at Johns Hopkins. The Wilson’s moved to their new home just before the 1890–91 school year began.

By now Wilson was an established scholar. He had two books out, both of which were well-received, and he was becoming a popular speaker, being invited around the eastern part of the United States to give talks on the history of politics. He had three daughters he loved to play with and a wife he adored. His family continued to grow as they took in Ellen’s three siblings. Stockton Axson lived with them in Connecticut and attended Wesleyan, where he earned his BA in 1890. The younger brother, Edward (Eddie) lived with the family while he attended Princeton. The youngest, Margaret (Madge) came to live with the family in 1894 when she was 13. Also several cousins, George Howe, Helen Bones, and Florence Hoyt, lived with the family at various times. As a result, the Wilson household was always full of young people ranging from their late teens to the youngest, Wilson’s daughter Eleanor who turned three when the family moved to Princeton. Other family members came to stay for long visits. Wilson also began to think about having his elderly father come to live with them. At any one time there were as many as ten to twelve people living in the Wilson household. This included two woman servants, which was not unusual for a large middle class family at the time.

The Wilsons originally rented a home in Princeton. In 1895 they began to plan on building a new home of their own on Library Place in town, just a short walk to campus. Ellen did much of the design work herself and they paid $3,000 for the land and $14,000 to have the house built. To earn enough money to pay for the new, Tudor-revival home, Wilson began travelling even more, giving speeches to earn the
fees, and teaching at Johns Hopkins as well as at Princeton. The work began to strain his health. Friends noticed that he looked tired and over-worked, and in May 1896 Wilson suffered what may have been his first, albeit mild, stroke. Wilson suddenly found that he could no longer use his right hand, which he attributed to writer’s cramp. He compensated by writing, surprisingly legibly, with his left hand. For the next year Wilson used his left hand. Also, after talking it over with Ellen and their doctor, Wilson agreed to a much-needed vacation to Britain. The trip, which Wilson would take alone in the summer of 1896, was paid for by a wealthy neighbor. Wilson left at the end of May and spent the summer bicycling through England and relaxing (Weinstein 1981: 140–2).

Weinstein notes that after this episode, Wilson seemed more driven, and in denial about his health. Ironically, given his history of worrying about his health, and the psychosomatic nature of his “digestive problems” he now minimized a very real problem. Cooper notes that if it was a stroke, it was apparently minor, but that it “came as an unwelcome reminder of vulnerability and mortality.” Wilson threw himself even more into his work, but now he was writing not only scholarly works, but for a popular audience in order to make money to support his family. The best example of this is probably his book George Washington, which was first published as a series of articles in Harper’s, and then as a book in 1896. George Washington is, to be blunt, not a good book. Wilson’s prose sometimes slipped into a faux eighteenth-century style. Even his close friend and brother-in-law, Stockton Axson, noted the author’s “over-styled manner of writing.” More importantly, Wilson did not do any original research and his discussion of Washington broke no new ground. It was simply a popular biography, written using other popular books as sources, written to provide money for a young family. However, it received generally good reviews and sold well enough for Wilson to repeat his efforts when he wrote the five-volume History of the American People. Once again Wilson’s work was not very original, and his prose somewhat overdone, but it was a best seller because it was entertaining (Bragdon 1967: 454; Weinstein 1981: 148–50; Cooper 2009: 70–1).

This does not mean that Wilson was incapable of writing good history. His book on the Civil War, Division and Reunion, published in 1893, was an early attempt to bridge the gap between northern and southern interpretations of the war. Cooper referred to it as “a work of synthesis, not original research.” Wilson’s conclusion, that the south had been correct about the rights of states when the union was formed, but that the north was correct in seeing how that union had evolved and changed by 1860, may seem to modern eyes to be a clumsy attempt to make everybody happy. But when it was published it was well received by most reviewers as a way to view the war that was free of the heated partisan arguments of the previous generation. However, Wilson ignored the moral issues raised by slavery, before and during the war (Cooper 2009: 73).

By 1900 Wilson was looking for a new outlet for his ambition. He found a fresh opportunity when what was now Princeton University began looking for a replacement for President Patton in 1902. Patton’s inactivity had alienated much of the faculty and the trustees. When it was clear he could no longer rely on their support, Patton resigned, recommending Wilson as his successor. The trustees agreed immediately, and unanimously elected Wilson as Princeton’s thirteenth President in June 1902. Wilson had always considered the number 13 to be his lucky number, as it
was the number of letters in his first and last names combined, so his elevation as the thirteenth President of the university was a good omen.\textsuperscript{1} While his efforts to enter national politics as Undersecretary of State under President Cleveland had been stymied, Wilson could enjoy his success at university politics, and as president of an established university he could command more attention for his views as a writer than a mere professor (Cooper 2009: 77–80).

Wilson’s battles to reform Princeton reveal a lot about his personality. Those interested in the details of Wilson’s policies should check Chapter 3 in this volume. However, Wilson’s actions highlighted some of his most positive attributes, as well as some of the negative aspects of his personality. On the positive side, Wilson’s campaign to reform his beloved university illustrates his dislike of entrenched privilege when he felt it inhibited the ability of others to get ahead. If isolating the graduate students, or allowing the elitist eating clubs to continue hurt the ability of every undergraduate to prosper to the best of his ability, then Wilson would tear down those barriers. His winning the battle to establish the proctor system also shows that he could be an inspirational leader who could move others to follow his vision. This talent would show itself again numerous times as President of the United States.

On the negative side, Wilson displayed his stubbornness and unwillingness to compromise when he thought he was right. He may not have been able to find a compromise with Dean West or with the eating club alumnae, but he pushed both issues long after it was clear he was at a severe disadvantage. Once, when arguing a point with a theology professor, the professor tried to end the discussion noting “Well, Dr. Wilson, there are two sides to every question.” “Yes,” Wilson replied, “a right side and a wrong side!” Wilson took this approach in his struggles at Princeton and ended up making allies for his political enemies and losing everything, instead of gaining at least part of what he struggled for. His inflexibility in such circumstances also cost him his best friend, Professor John Hibben, who sided with West. Wilson never did forgive his friend, a reflection of his ability to carry a grudge, as well as a reflection of how deeply his friend’s actions hurt him. He also, as Cooper noted, was thereafter reluctant to open himself to another friend as much as he had done to Hibben. The emotional turmoil also may have affected Wilson’s health, as noted by Weinstein. He complained that his right arm was weak and numb. Ellen blamed the break with Hibben and urged her husband to take a vacation to rest. Wilson went to Bermuda beginning a series of events that have become one of the most contentious issues in the historiography on Wilson, his relationship with Mary Allen Hulbert Peck (Link 1956: 68; Weinstein 1981: 179; Cooper 2009: 93–4).

Dearest Friend

Wilson met Mrs Peck on his 1907 trip to Bermuda. An attractive woman, Weinstein described her as a “vivacious, witty, sophisticated and talented woman of forty-five.” Married, but long separated from her husband, Mrs Peck spent every winter in Bermuda. Wilson was immediately taken with her and when he returned to Princeton he sent her a book of his essays. In early 1908 they renewed their friendship in Bermuda, going for long walks, attending teas and parties, and he confided in her his frustration over events at Princeton. Weinstein refers to Wilson’s “devotion” to
Mrs Peck. Cooper notes that he “rushed to see her as soon as his ship docked” and writes that Wilson was “plainly smitten” with his new friend (Weinstein 1981: 183; Cooper 2009: 99).

Weinstein and Saunders both reassure their readers that Wilson’s devotion to Ellen did not waver. He continued to write long loving letters to his wife, but he no longer seemed as lonely as he had on previous trips. Cooper noted that Wilson’s “feelings for Mary Peck would wax and wane, growing particularly intense during the times when he was suffering strain and setbacks” in his efforts to reform the university. But Ellen apparently noticed that Wilson had become attached to Mrs Peck and Weinstein notes that sometime in 1908 Ellen confronted Wilson over the relationship. Ellen later told Wilson’s White House physician and friend Dr Grayson that her husband’s relationship with Mrs Peck “was the only unhappiness he had caused her during their married life” (Weinstein 1981: 184; Saunders 1985: 188; Cooper 2009: 99–101).

Inevitably this leads to the question, how far did the relationship go? Did it move beyond emotional ties to the physical? Cooper does not say, although he does write, “some commentators have concluded that it was a real, sexual, affair. Wilson may have been over fifty, but the sexual desires he had shown earlier for Ellen had not cooled.” Weinstein does not directly address the question of physical intimacy, but he clearly believes that there was an emotional intimacy in the relation. Wilson, he wrote, “fell in love with Mary Peck in 1908.” Baker, as might be expected, as he was Wilson’s friend and official biographer, describes Mrs Peck as a “friend” and sneers at “scandalous innuendo – the last resource of unscrupulous politics.” Link does not mention the issue at all in The Road to the White House and in a footnote in The Papers of Woodrow Wilson describes their relationship as a “warm friendship.” Saunders describes their relationship being close, and as an “affair” but notes of Ellen’s feelings, that while Wilson’s wife knew Wilson was attracted to Mary Peck, “what else she knew, or what else there was to know in 1909 and 1910, is a matter of conjecture. There is no unambiguous evidence to prove how intimate the relationship became between Woodrow and Mary.” Miller goes a bit further, “It is possible, maybe probable, that their relationship became physically intimate.” Mrs. Peck wrote her memoirs, but remained mum on how far the relationship did or did not go. The question, in other words, remains open and absent some startling new piece of evidence, will remain so, some historians agreeing with Miller that the relationship was likely physical, and others, such as Cooper, unsure. As Wilson’s rival, Theodore Roosevelt, commented in 1912 when heard rumors of an affair, “You can’t convince the American people that a man is a Romeo who looks so much like the apothecary’s clerk” (Baker 1927b: 268; Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 17, 30 n.1; Weinstein 1981: 188; Saunders 1985: 201; Cooper 2009: 100–1; Miller 2010: 45).

Politics

By 1910 Wilson’s battles with the trustees and alumni over the role and place of a graduate school at Princeton had made his continuing as Princeton’s President impossible. Fate intervened that summer as a new opportunity presented itself, allowing Wilson to achieve his lifelong dream of actively entering politics, not as an observer and commentator, but as an active participant. Recruited
by the state’s Democratic political bosses, in September 1910 Wilson was made the Democratic nominee for Governor of New Jersey. His talents as a politician, honed by years of academic politics, were more than adequate for statewide politics. Wilson liked to tell humorous stories about how politicians took this supposedly sheltered and naïve professor lightly. Cooper notes, “After dealing with college politicians,” Wilson commented during his first year as Governor of New Jersey, “I find that the men with whom I am dealing . . . now seem like amateurs” (Cooper 2009: 117).

Wilson’s political career is discussed in depth in other chapters in this volume, but how did it affect his personal life? Ellen Wilson was his most important advisor, one to whom Wilson would listen and whose opinion he would always take into account. In 1912, when he was starting on his quest for the presidency, Ellen helped him repair a political breach with three-time Democratic presidential nominee, William Jennings Bryan. Bryan’s support would be crucial for any future Democratic candidate for the White House and, unfortunately for Wilson, a 1907 letter from Wilson had been leaked to the press in which he declared that he wished someone would knock Bryan “into a cocked hat,” i.e., end his political career. In March 1912 while Wilson was in Atlanta giving a speech, Ellen heard that Bryan was at nearby Princeton Theological Seminary giving a speech of his own. Ellen cabled her husband to come home immediately and then invited Bryan for dinner. Wilson and the “Great Commoner” enjoyed their dinner together and began to form a political alliance that would help propel the New Jersey governor into the presidency and Bryan into the role as Secretary of State (Saunders 1985: 214–15; Cooper 2009: 142).

While Ellen was Wilson’s most important supporter, she did not relish life in the White House. In contrast to other would be First Ladies – Nellie Taft comes to mind – Ellen did not want the attention or prestige of being the President’s wife, but she was willing to back her husband’s ambition. She worried though that the stress of the job would endanger Wilson’s health. As Cooper noted, “the burden of public appearances, interviews and correspondence weighed heavily on Ellen.” Once Wilson won, Ellen planned yet another move for the family, from the home where they lived in Princeton to the executive mansion. The Wilsons did not plan any inaugural balls, however, believing them to be excessive. After the Inauguration parade, the Wilsons enjoyed a dinner with family and friends at the White House (Weinstein 1981: 253; Cooper 2009: 196–9).

The Wilson daughters were now all in their twenties and single. All had attended college, as Wilson insisted they acquire a good education. Margaret, the eldest, spent much of her time in New York City where she was beginning a musical career. Jessie and Eleanor moved into the White House along with a Wilson cousin, Helen Bones, who acted as Ellen’s assistant. As had been the norm during the Wilson’s time at Wesleyan and at Princeton, other family members came and went, often staying for extended visits. Wilson set up a billiards table in his new home and learned to play golf as exercise since bicycling around the city was out of the question. He refused to join a local country club because it was too elitist, and played at a public course in northern Virginia. The White House had a small fleet of automobiles now, thanks to President Taft, and the Wilsons enjoyed going for long rides in the nearby countryside. Ellen set up a studio on the top floor of the White House and began to paint again. She also redecorated some of the White House in the Arts and Crafts style and used her purchases to promote several schools in Georgia. Jessie and Eleanor
took to the city’s social swirl as their parents hosted receptions for the diplomatic corps and for members of Congress. Evenings, when not filled with official events, were for family. After dinner, during which Wilson forbade talk of work, the family would retire to read, sing, play games, and relax. Wilson would sometimes go see the Washington Senators play baseball or attend Keith’s vaudeville theater. In June 1914, the family enjoyed the first movie known to be shown at the White House. The Italian drama *Cabiria* was shown on the lawn while the family watched from a White House porch (Cooper 2009: 199–200; Benbow 2010b: 513).

As President, Wilson took a direct, hands-on role in leading the government. Chapter 5 discusses this at length, but Wilson’s active role as President echoes the part he played leading Princeton and as Governor of New Jersey. He preferred an active style of leadership and, having gathered as much information as he could, would trust to his own judgment. He even wrote his own speeches, drafting them in shorthand, then typing them himself. From 1913–16 this style served Wilson well and his administration achieved a remarkable number of significant reforms. There was a negative to this style as well, however, as it could allow free expression of his stubborn streak, the part of his personality that would answer the comment that there are two sides to every question with “yes . . . a right side and a wrong side!”

While Wilson worked hard, he was not the stereotypical workaholic. Rising at 8:00 a.m. he ate breakfast, oatmeal, coffee, and two raw eggs in orange juice. Recommended by a doctor, he likened it to swallowing a newborn baby. He entered the Oval Office at 9:00 a.m. The first hour was dedicated to answering the mail. From 10:00 until 1:00 p.m. Wilson met with visitors, scheduled for no more than 15 minutes apiece by his secretary, Joseph Tumulty, who followed Wilson from Trenton. Wilson took his lunch with family in the private living quarters, then finished with two more hours of meetings. Finishing about 4:00 p.m. he had time for golf, now his preferred form of exercise, or for a drive with family. It sounds almost leisurely, but the schedule was possible because of Wilson’s self-discipline. He set a certain amount of work to do, and did it. Weinstein refers to such dedicated work habits to Wilson’s personality, which he describes as “anosognosic,” in which a person not only denies the seriousness of his illness, which Wilson did in regard to his cardiovascular disease, but as “highly conscientious and compulsive about work.” The influence of Wilson’s father can also be seen at play, with his insistence that Wilson find just the perfect word to use, preferably the first time (Weinstein 1981: 146–7: 250; Cooper 2009: 201).

While Wilson’s family life provided a respite from the worries of the executive office, there were some problems. He never did adjust to reporters’ interest in his family, believing them to be off limits; “the ladies of my household are not servants of the government and they are not public characters.” When a newspaper falsely reported that one of the Wilson daughters was engaged he lost his temper at reporters. When middle daughter Jessie did become engaged in 1913 to Francis Sayre there was a grand White House wedding and the Wilsons tolerated the accompanying press coverage (Saunders 1985: 262–3; Cooper 2009: 202, 257).

In early 1914, Ellen began to complain of weakness and on March 1 she fell after fainting in the White House. In hindsight it is clear that she was very ill, and Wilson was clearly worried, but he remained in denial about the possible seriousness of the situation and Ellen’s doctors did nothing to make him realize the gravity of her illness.
Wilson wrote to a friend, “There is nothing at all the matter with her organically.” In reality Ellen had Bright’s disease, an archaic term which could refer to several diseases of the kidneys. Weinstein describes it as “chronic nephritis.” Cooper notes that she began to lose weight and spent much of the time resting. Wilson would sit by her bedside to work, sometimes holding her hand with one of his, while typing with the other (Weinstein 1981: 254; Saunders 1985: 273–5; Miller 2010: 89–90).

Despite the illness, in May 1914 the family celebrated the marriage of Wilson’s youngest daughter, Eleanor (Nellie), to William Gibbs McAdoo, a widower several decades older than the bride and Wilson’s Secretary of the Treasury. Eleanor’s choice of husbands was not as popular with her parents as Jessie’s had been. She was Wilson’s favorite among his three daughters. In Cooper’s words, “she shared her father’s playful streak and sense of fun, and she was the one who could always make him laugh.” Once married, she would be leaving to start her own household. In addition, McAdoo was not only 50 years old to Eleanor’s 25, he had seven children, two of which were older than his new bride. And, as Cooper notes, he was Wilson’s Secretary of the Treasury and often ignored Wilson’s desire not to talk about work at the family dinner table. This wedding was small, with less than 100 guests as compared to about 500 at Jessie’s. The smaller wedding was easier to plan and the groom was a widower so it seemed appropriate to scale down the ceremony. Ellen got through the wedding planning and events despite her illness, although she cried through the entire ceremony. Saunders quotes Helen Bones that Ellen only made it through the wedding through her strong willpower (Saunders 1985: 268–73; Cooper 2009: 259–60).

Ellen died on August 6, 1914, in the White House with her children present and Woodrow holding her hand. When she stopped breathing Wilson walked over to a window sobbing, “Oh my God, what am I to do?” Ellen was buried in Rome, Georgia with her parents. Wilson was bereft. Weinstein noted that Wilson “went through a severe reactive depression.” He complained to Colonel House that he couldn’t think straight. Baker discusses how Wilson spent his time in solitude, his “method was that of the scholar who goes down into his own mind.” After the initial shock he lost himself in his work, while Helen Bones and Margaret Wilson shared First Lady duties. At the urging of Dr Grayson, Wilson began to play golf again for exercise with the doctor and a Secret Service agent or two for company. Grayson also moved into the White House to keep the President company (Baker 1935: 14; Weinstein 1981: 258–60; Saunders 1985: 276–9).

Because the household was officially in mourning, Washington’s social scene continued without the President. In February 1915, Wilson did agree to a showing of The Birth of a Nation in the White House along with his family and a few friends. This screening of the notoriously racist movie, often erroneously referred to as the first showing of a movie at the White House, was followed the next night by a special showing at the Press Club for members of Congress and the Supreme Court, but it was the showing at the White House, arranged so as to follow the polite conventions of mourning, that is remembered still. Had the household not been in mourning, it is possible Wilson might have attended the showing with the rest of official Washington, and the film would not have earned the endorsement that it was shown at the President’s home (Cooper 2009: 272–3).
Edith Bolling Galt

In early 1915, Cooper notes, Wilson’s depression was easing. He began to joke some with his family. Still, while the depression lifted some, it was not gone and Wilson’s family and friends worried about his loneliness. Accordingly, in March 1915 they arranged for Wilson to meet Edith Bolling Galt, a pretty, Virginia-born wealthy 42-year-old local woman, owner of the most prestigious jewelry store in DC. Edith and Helen Bones had become good friends and went for frequent walks. One day in mid March, Helen and Edith went for a walk and Helen invited Edith to the White House living quarters for tea. Edith protested that she wasn’t dressed nicely enough, but agreed when reassured that the President was not at home. Meanwhile, Wilson and Dr Grayson returned from playing golf and ran into Helen and Edith in the White House living quarters. Edith and Wilson got along well immediately and she was soon invited for dinner. The two began seeing each other frequently (Baker 1937: 45; Cooper 2009: 279–81).

Wilson’s courtship of Edith is another topic that has fascinated historians, as it is one of the few times a sitting president courted and married while in office. Wilson fell in love quickly and proposed in late May. Edith refused, probably not because she was unwilling, but because it was so soon after Ellen’s death nine months before. Wilson continued his suit. Many evenings he walked to Edith’s house on 20th Street, only a few blocks from the White House, with a Secret Service man in tow. The couple would go for long rides in the President’s limousine, sometimes drawing the curtain for privacy in the back while they parked. Wilson wrote long, passionate love letters, sometimes several a day to Edith, and she responded in kind. A short crisis quickly passed when Wilson confessed his past history with Mrs Peck. While it is unknown what exactly Wilson said, Edith forgave whatever transgression had occurred. On a vacation to one of Wilson’s favorite resorts, Cornish, New Hampshire, with family and friends chaperoning, Wilson again proposed and Edith accepted. They were married on the evening of December 18, 1915, at Edith’s home. The couple went on a honeymoon at Hot Springs, Virginia. A Secret Service agent on the presidential train reported seeing the happy new groom dancing down the aisle of the train in his pajamas, dressing robe and slippers, singing “Oh you beautiful doll! You great big beautiful doll!” (Cooper 2009: 304–6).

Wilson ran for re-election in 1916 with Edith as his new wife and advisor. After winning an exceptionally close race against Republican Charles Evans Hughes, he had to deal with worsening relations with Germany and the entry of the United States into World War I. This chapter is not the place to discuss Wilson’s war policy, or the Versailles Treaty to follow. But Wilson and Edith worked to set an example of sacrifice and support for the war. To save labor, sheep grazed the lawn at 1600 Pennsylvania and the wool auctioned for charity. Wilson supported the American Red Cross’s efforts to provide aid to American servicemen and Edith volunteered to serve coffee and donuts at a canteen to soldiers passing through Washington (Miller 2010: 150–1).

During the war Wilson began to show signs of exhaustion and, according to Weinstein, “showed behavioral responses to stress” and, on several occasions, Wilson’s “outbursts of anger” showed his “judgment was not as good as it had been before.”
Political dissent in the United States was often suppressed during the war by official laws such as the Espionage and Sedition Acts, as well as by actions by private individuals. German language newspapers were closed, German books were burned or banned, and schools stopped teaching the German language. Wilson, in Cooper’s words, “declined to speak out against these abuses.” Cooper explains the suppression in part as being the result of Wilson’s delegating so much authority to his subordinates, some of whom, such as Postmaster General Albert Burleson, were eager to act against any perceived disloyalty. Wilson remained “passive” in the face of abuses and refused to act. Baker spent little time on the issue, and even so, his portrayal of Wilson is not especially flattering. He noted that Wilson initially wanted “a mild form of censorship” to protect information that might directly aid Germany. However, Baker later quotes Wilson as asking his Attorney General if an anti-war newspaper, The People’s Counselor, had committed treason, which would seem to go beyond “mild censorship.” The Attorney General, Thomas Gregory, replied that the paper had not committed treason, but they had violated the Espionage Act. Cooper is likely correct that Wilson and Gregory regretted the most extreme abuses, but the fact remains that Wilson allowed newspapers to be closed and American citizens to be jailed for speaking out against a war they opposed. Along with race, the repression during the war remains one of the most difficult issues in dealing with Wilson and one of the darker moments of his career (Baker 1939: 83, 283; Weinstein 1981: 320–1; Cooper 2009: 399–401).

Wilson’s stubbornness famously showed itself again during the fight to ratify the Versailles Treaty in the US Senate. Having gone to Paris himself to negotiate the treaty, Wilson refused to agree to the Senate’s reservations. Believing he could convince the American people to force the Senate to yield, Wilson went on an extended speaking tour from Ohio to the Pacific Northwest, down to California and then back east. Edith, Tumulty, and Grayson went with him. His wife and his doctor had tried to talk him out of it, fearing the probable toll on his health, but Wilson insisted. Cooper quotes his remark to Edith that he would be “a slacker and never able to look those boys [the soldiers that he sent to war] in the eye” if he didn’t go. Weinstein claimed that Wilson’s “capacities were below par” from illness and a possible small stroke while in Paris even before the treaty fight began. As the trip continued, Weinstein believes, Wilson began to suffer from “cardiac decompression.” He had trouble breathing, suffered from blinding headaches and had to sleep sitting up. Weinstein believes that Wilson was already showing signs of a stroke when he spoke in Pueblo, Colorado on September 25, including a temporary paralysis of his left side. Edith and the others finally convinced Wilson to return to Washington. On October 2, while back at home in the White House, Wilson had another, larger stroke. His left side was paralyzed and he lost vision in the left half of both eyes. With the blindness he already suffered in his left eye, this meant that the only vision Wilson had remaining was in the right side of his right eye (Weinstein 1981: 349–55; Cooper 2009: 519).

Wilson’s illness began one of the most controversial periods of his presidency. Edith and Grayson did their best to hide his condition. Wilson suffered, in Weinstein’s view mentioned earlier, from anosognosia, a condition in which the patient either denies they are ill, or denies the seriousness of it. Wilson knew he was sick, but would not admit that it hampered his judgment or his ability to carry out his duties. Edith
believed that “it would be therapeutic to conceal the seriousness of his illness from him.” Grayson apparently agreed that knowledge of the seriousness of the President’s illness would hamper Wilson’s authority in office. He told reporters that Wilson was suffering from a nervous breakdown and fatigue. For at least a month, not even Tumulty was able to go see the President. Wilson had given his cabinet members a great deal of authority to act as they saw fit, so the government continued to operate, but decisions that required the President’s approval were delayed. In the meantime, Edith acted as, in Cooper’s words, Wilson’s “gatekeeper,” deciding who could see Wilson and what official papers would reach him. Cooper accepts Edith’s claim that she was thinking of Wilson’s health by shielding him, but also that she did what she thought Wilson himself would have wanted. Miller claimed that Edith’s refusal to restrict the number of people who saw her husband “may have actually impeded his recovery.” Modern treatment for strokes includes limiting the patient’s isolation, but, as Miller noted, Edith was following the advice of Wilson’s doctors who were themselves following what was then thought to be the most effective treatment. Two of Wilson’s main biographers, Link and Baker, did not discuss this episode in their major biographies. Baker stopped with the Armistice in his eight-volume *Life and Letters*. Link only reached April 1917 and the declaration of war in his five-volume biography. However, Link did discuss Wilson’s stroke in comments as editor of *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. Volume 63 of the 69-volume set covers the period of the end of the speaking tour and the October stroke. In his Introduction, Link notes that while domestic affairs were still being taken care of by the cabinet, “the conduct of the foreign relations of the United States . . . was totally paralyzed” (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 63, x; Weinstein 1981: 358–60; Cooper 2009: 536–7; Miller 2010: 194).

Wilson never did fully recover from his strokes. He remained mostly blind and his left side was always weak. He walked with a cane the rest of his life. He also remained in denial of how serious his condition was, even considering how to run for a third term in 1920 and perhaps considering running in 1924. Fortunately for Wilson, the Democrats’ nomination went to Ohio Governor James Cox, who, along with Vice-Presidential running mate Franklin D. Roosevelt, was crushed in a landslide by the Republican, Ohio Senator Warren G. Harding. Race riots tore through American cities and the country slipped into a short, sharp depression as the American military demobilized from the war. The Versailles Treaty failed to pass the Senate and the United States remained technically at war with Germany. Wilson began to plan his retirement, deciding to stay in Washington where he could return, he hoped, to writing. Edith began house hunting and found their new home in northwest Washington just off of Massachusetts Avenue near Embassy Row. With the help of friends, the Wilsons paid $150,000 for their new home at 2340 S Street NW.

**The Final Years**

Wilson and Edith left the White House for their new home on March 4, 1921. Wilson rode with President-elect Harding to the Capitol, but did not attend the ceremony because it required him to walk up too many steps. Gene Smith’s *When the Cheering Stopped: The Last Years of Woodrow Wilson* describes how Wilson and his wife settled into a quiet routine. Because of his illness, Wilson rarely slept through the night so
Edith had her own bedroom, although the couple’s rooms were only a few feet apart with a small nurse’s room between them on the third floor. They had two servants, Mary and Isaac Scott, an African-American couple who lived on the top floor. Wilson purchased a Piece-Arrow from the White House automobile pool and they took daily rides through the area, especially enjoying going through nearby Rock Creek Park. Wilson still walked with a cane so they had an elevator installed using an existing trunk lift. Wilson’s billiards table was installed on the main floor for the family’s use. The gentleman’s reception area was turned into a secretary’s office for Randolph Bolling, Edith’s brother who acted as Wilson’s assistant. Randolph lived on the third floor with the rest of the family and a spare room was kept for other members of the family to use on visits. The contents of a small wine cellar were moved from the White House to S Street as well.

In the morning, Wilson would ride the elevator down with Isaac and review the day’s mail in the secretary’s office, named the “Dugout” because of Wilson’s love of baseball. He would exercise by walking back and forth, using a cane, along the front entryway. Wilson took his meals in his bedroom with Edith keeping him company. Dr Grayson remained Wilson’s doctor and he allowed Wilson one visitor a day in the afternoon, a restriction Wilson often ignored. Sometimes he would go see a Senators baseball game, Wilson sitting in his parked automobile along the foul line. In the evening, Edith would read to her husband, often a western or a murder mystery. On Saturdays they would often attend Keith’s, indulging Wilson’s love of vaudeville. A local theater owner gave Wilson a movie projector. Son-in-law William McAdoo was an attorney for the new United Artists Studio so Wilson could enjoy a variety of new Hollywood films at home. A large screen was installed in Wilson’s library and friends and family would come over for movie night. He had a particular fondness for romantic comedies and adventures featuring Katherine MacDonald, “The American Rose,” a popular actress of the time who was reportedly prettier than talented.

Wilson remains the only president to retire to Washington, although a few others, including John Quincy Adams and William Howard Taft, stayed in Washington to serve in other capacities after leaving the White House. He refused to capitalize on his position, refusing to make endorsements or to write his memoirs despite substantial financial offers. He tried forming a law partnership with his last Secretary of State, Bainbridge Colby, but the practice was abandoned when Wilson refused most cases because he felt they were a conflict of interest. Wilson also retained the ability to hold a grudge, especially when encouraged by Edith. In 1922, Wilson’s longtime faithful aide and secretary Joseph Tumulty asked Wilson to send a message to the Jefferson Day Dinner at Democratic headquarters in New York. Wilson at first refused, but finally made a vague statement of support for whoever the 1924 Democratic nominee would be. Tumulty read the message to the dinner guests and the press reported it as a statement of support for the 1920 nominee James Cox who hoped to run again. Wilson was furious and denounced the report that he had made any such statement as a lie. Tumulty frantically backpedaled, apologizing and trying to explain his error, but it was to no avail. Edith had never liked him, thinking him a crude New Jersey politician, and Wilson never spoke to his longtime friend again. Smith portrays the episode as Edith’s work. Weinstein does not discuss this incident, but noted that Wilson seemed, at this time, to be dependent on his wife. Miller blames Wilson rather than Edith, noting that Edith wrote Tumulty a “friendly letter”
after the incident and that Wilson refused Dr Grayson’s efforts to patch relations up between the two men. Cooper places the blame for the rift on Tumulty, claiming that Wilson “took no hard feelings away from the incident, and he later recommended Tumulty as a possible Senate candidate in New Jersey” for 1924. “The hard feelings,” Cooper writes, “were on Tumulty’s side.” Tumulty, however, was refused entrance to see the dying Wilson in early 1924, which suggests there were indeed lingering hard feelings toward him on S Street (Smith 1966: 194–6; Weinstein 1981: 375; Cooper 2009: 588; Miller 2010: 235–6).

Wilson’s health began to decline in 1923, perhaps after suffering small strokes in late 1922, although he and Edith still enjoyed their time together. Wilson could not write any longer and his last article, “The Road Away From Revolution” was saved only by heavy editing. His planned final book, The Philosophy of Politics, never materialized beyond a page dedicating the work to Edith. He could only read with a magnifying glass and by 1923 could only look at pictures, particularly enjoying National Geographic and various movie magazines. Democratic politicians and world leaders, including David Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau stopped by to pay their respects. In November 1923, Wilson made his final public appearance and his final speech. On November 10, he made his only radio broadcast after technicians moved equipment temporarily into his library. His comments only filled one typed page, and he spoke haltingly, occasionally being prompted by Edith. He called for the United States to honor its commitment to enter the League of Nations. When it was finished, he stepped back and said, “That is all, isn’t it?” It almost was: the next day, the fifth anniversary of Armistice Day, an estimated 20,000 people made their way to S Street to see Wilson. Tumulty, persona non grata with the Wilsons but still loyal to his former chief, quickly threw together a small band to lead people to Wilson’s door. Wilson came out on the porch, and made a number of short prepared remarks. Before going inside, however, he spoke without notes about his admiration for the troops he had sent into battle. He then retired inside to cheers. It was the last time he spoke in public (Smith 1966: 216–21; Weinstein 1981: 375).

In early 1924, Wilson’s health began to sink further. It was clear to Edith and to Dr Grayson that he was dying. On January 30, telegrams were sent to his daughters to come quickly: Margaret Wilson was in New York and Eleanor McAdoo was in California. Jessie Sayre was in Thailand where her husband worked as an advisor to the royal government and could not return. At 11:15 a.m. on February 3, 1924 with Edith, Margaret, Grayson and two nurses in attendance, Wilson quietly died. He was buried three days later in a vault at the National Cathedral, the only president buried in Washington DC to date. Edith Wilson died on December 28, 1961, her husband’s birthday, and is also buried at the Cathedral.

**Afterward**

How then should the historian view Wilson? His legislative record and his leadership during World War I obviously make his presidency one of the most consequential in American history. However, claiming that an administration is “consequential” is only the beginning of the historian’s task. Examining why the events of the Wilson administration occurred as they did, and the role Wilson played in those events is
also necessary, as is examining how Wilson, the person, fits into the story. This is the challenge of Woodrow Wilson for the historian. Studying his personality, the role of his family, of his “operational code” – to borrow a phrase from political science – remains a challenge still; a full century after Wilson’s presidency began. Much of Wilson’s life remains to be explored using what evidence we can find a century later, and surely not everything has been discovered that there is to understand about the twenty-eighth President of the United States.

In recent years, there has been more written about Wilson’s religious background. This is an area that is still ripe for further exploration. There is a need for a scholarly biography of Wilson’s maternal uncle, James Woodrow, who was not only a major influence on Wilson, but an interesting figure in the history of the southern Presbyterian church as well. Moreover, while Saunders’s biography of Ellen Axson Wilson is very good, and Miller’s work covers both Ellen and Edith, there has been little scholarly work on Wilson’s family as a whole aside from his two wives. While there need not be individual works on Wilson’s two sisters, his younger brother, and his three daughters, a study of the entire family would not only shed more light on Wilson the man, but would be an interesting study of family life in the United States in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, his son-in-law and treasury secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, is still lacking a substantive biography, especially one that discusses his relationship with his president father-in-law. Finally, with an increasing number of historians looking at popular culture, a study of Wilson and his love of movies and vaudeville, going beyond Birth of a Nation, would provide an interesting case study of how film replaced vaudeville. Wilson’s presidency occurred at the same time as the birth of Hollywood and the expansion of the US film industry. Wilson was not only the first president to show movies at the White House, he was an early pioneer in the use of film in political campaigns, and McAdoo was involved in the founding of United Artists Studio. Film was also an important part of the propaganda campaign initiated by the Wilson administration to win popular support for World War I. There is still much fertile ground here for historians to explore.

Note
1 “Woodrow Wilson” has 13 letters, while “Thomas Wilson” has 12. But at least “Thomas W. Wilson” has 13.

References


**FURTHER READING**
