American Homespun for the President's House

Ellen Axson Wilson and the Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room
- American Homespun for the President's House -
Ellen Axson Wilson and the Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room

Kathleen Curtis Wilson

Woodrow Wilson House - A National Trust Historic Site - Washington, DC
Copyright © 1997
THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
October 23, 1997

Dear Friends:

As honorary patron, I am pleased to have this opportunity to send greetings to each of you visiting the exhibition: "American Homespun for the President’s House - Ellen Axson Wilson and the Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room."

From our earliest history, crafts have been an integral part of American life. Skills that once assured our basic survival have become the foundation of activities that ensure the survival of the American spirit. They inspire us and give us a sense of human possibility. Since First Lady Ellen Wilson first decorated the Blue Mountain room with fabrics hand-woven by Appalachian women, First Ladies have utilized objects created by skilled Americans with knowledge handed from family to family and generation to generation. Crafts from her Val-Kill project and the Works Progress Administration were used by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to furnish an upstairs bedroom. American crafts are often displayed at White House holiday celebrations and serve as center pieces for White House events.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the some of the people who made possible two years of research culminating in the exhibition Homespun for the President’s House - Ellen Axson Wilson and the Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room. From the time Robert Brunk and I discussed the idea of uncovering the complete story behind the decoration of the Blue Mountain Room for his book, May We All Remember Well, Vol. 1 to the opening of the exhibit, a number of people directed, supported and encouraged me to find the answers needed to complete the project.

First I would like to thank assistant director of the Woodrow Wilson House, Frank J. Aucella. Without hesitation he opened the textile collections for my documentation, shared books, photographs and especially his time to educate me about Woodrow and Ellen Axson Wilson’s public life. And he did all this before we even conceived of an exhibition. To my delight and great appreciation, Melodie Sweeney, museum specialist at the National Museum of American History has enthusiastically shared my interest in the Appalachian history I uncovered, handled my infinite requests with grace and efficiency, and managed to steer me effortlessly through a huge amount of paperwork. Without her help this exhibition could not have become a reality. White House Curator Betty Monkman was interested in learning more about the Blue Mountain Room from the time I first contacted her, always able to come up with another “piece” of the puzzle to validate my discoveries.

Artists, like those who have contributed to the Blue Mountain Room exhibit, strengthen the American spirit. In their lives and in their work, they invite us to consider and comprehend ourselves as a people and they give us their precious gifts of curiosity, imagination and understanding. This exhibit reminds us of the need to preserve our culture and heritage and demonstrates that our diversity is our greatest strength. It helps us remember that our arts and ideas not only bind us to our past, they also bind us to each other.

Please accept my best wishes for an enjoyable visit.

Sincerely yours,

Hillary Rodham Clinton

I am especially grateful to East Tennessee State University English professor, Dr. James R. Reese, who urges me to publish more, edits my words but not my style, and lets me use his scanner even when its not convenient. Dr. Jean Haskell Speer, director of the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University continually suggested another Appalachian researcher to contact or archival source to explore and calmly encouraged me to persist when unforeseen circumstances nearly ended the project.

In Valle Crucis, North Carolina, Sibyl and Francis Pressly allowed me complete access to the Mast family information accumulated over years of owning the Mast Farm Inn; and Mary Moore Mast spent hours answering my endless questions and rummaging through closets and trunks to show me her grandmother’s weaving.

Finally, I want to thank Highland Craft Guild weaver Barbara Miller for sharing her research of Elmeda Walker; weave Neil Colmer in Berea Kentucky; The House of Fabrics, Asheville, NC; James B. Lloyd, special collections librarian, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN; Dr. Allan Strand, chairman of the board, The Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation; archivists Ruth Ash at Berry College and Shannon Wilson at Berea College; Eleanor Sayre, granddaughter of Ellen Wilson; Claire Smith; The Historical Society of Washington, DC; Olive Blair Graffam, curator of collections, DAR Museum; and an unnamed woman at the reference desk at the Library of Congress who succeeded in finding a “lost” book I desperately needed.
The Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room

As an artist and a southerner, Ellen Axson Wilson, the wife of the twenty-eighth president of the United States, saw first hand the expert craftsmanship of women during her travels to the North Carolina mountains and understood their struggle as artists and wage earners. By decorating the White House with handcrafted fabrics, she focused wide spread attention on the lives, financial needs, and talents of mountain women. The exhibition *Homespun for the President’s House* - Ellen Axson Wilson and the Decoration of the Blue Mountain Room is a unique opportunity to look inside the most famous house in the land for a better understanding of the compassionate spirit of artist Ellen Axson Wilson and to view striking examples of early twentieth-century American hand weaving by two extremely gifted Appalachian women, Allie Josephine Mast and Elmeda McHargue Walker.

The 1913 decoration of the Blue Mountain Room by the First Lady is a small but interesting paradox of America history. While Ellen Wilson was decorating the president’s bedroom with crafts reminiscent of a bygone era and directing her interest toward national education issues, President Wilson introduced his progressive campaign of reform. The room reflects two opposing turn-of-the-century American cultural movements - the establishment of America as a world industrial power and the beginning of the Arts and Crafts Revival, a movement that renewed interest in early American handicrafts. The ornately carved furniture and imported wallpaper in the room contrast with the old-timey look of handmade fabrics and baskets and juxtapose the two very different worlds, epitomizing a point in American history that attempted to blend both its past and its future. These two very divergent national concerns came together through the personal friendships of President and Mrs. Wilson.

No known textiles or baskets remain at the White House from Ellen Wilson’s decoration of the Blue Mountain Room. The present exhibit consists of both the textiles and basketry that were originally offered for sale by the Southern Industrial Educational Association and later given to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Other artifacts exhibited came from descendants of Josephine Mast and the permanent collection at the Woodrow Wilson House. Photographs and written documentation confirm style, color and provenance of each object.

Two rugs were woven for the White House by Allie Josephine Mast (1861-1936) in Valle Crucis, North Carolina. Weaving on her grandmother’s loom built in 1820, Josie used two-ply warp cotton and thick dark blue jute filling for the overshot design Sun, Moon and Stars. In order to make such a large floor covering, Josie wove six strips of the rug pattern, each thirty-five inches wide by seventeen feet long. The first two lengths had a border pattern block on one side, then Josie redrafted the border threads into another pattern block and wove four more rug lengths. Each length of the rug was started and finished with a border repeat so that when all six strips were stitched together, the rug measured approximately seventeen feet square and was bordered on all sides. The smaller rug, approximately eighteen inches by thirty-five inches, was displayed under a writing table next to the fireplace.

Sample rug from Mast family descendent, same pattern draft as rug woven for the White House in 1913. (Courtesy, Francis and Sibyl Pressly)
The White House paid $98.00 for the large rug and $6.16 for the smaller one on November 18, 1913. The large rug was sold April 16, 1920, the other sold or destroyed later.

The textiles on exhibit are woven in a style called “overshot” or “float,” meaning that some threads, usually the colored wool, lay loose or “float” to give a raised appearance. After every colored weft thread, there is a second thread, usually the same as the warp, needed to hold the fabric together. Although there is an illusion of circles in many overshot designs, each pattern is actually a geometric grouping of small square blocks. It is very rare for overshot weaving to be signed or dated, making identification of the weaver difficult, if not impossible. Fortunately, these textiles remained in the immediate Mast family or the Smithsonian and all have a clearly defined provenance.

Upholstery fabric in Double Chariot Wheels pattern was woven for the bed chamber by seventy-six year old Elmeda McHargue Walker of Flag Pond, Tennessee. She wove the sixty yards with natural cotton (singles) warp and finely spun blue wool filling. The First Lady used the fabric to cover three slipper chairs, an armchair, and a chaise lounge. It was also made into curtains for the two large windows overlooking the lawn and fountain in the rear of the White House. Elmeda’s spinster sister, Caroline, and sister-in-law, Martha, spun
wool and used indigo dye to color the thread for the yardage at the family home in Elkin, North Carolina. The White House purchased a sample of Walker’s upholstery, thirty-six inches square, on November 18, 1913 for $1.75.

Other items used in the decoration scheme were purchased at the Washington craft Exchange and sale in 1913, where Allanstand baskets and textiles were prominently featured. First Lady Ellen Wilson chose three baskets and a cream color cotton coverlet for the Victorian Lincoln bed. One basket was put on the floor next to the writing table; another was filled with small logs and placed beside the hearth. All textiles and baskets for the president’s bedroom were purchased with government funds, and became the property of the White House. The total cost of items bought through the craft Exchange was $292.16. The fifteen baskets on exhibit, given to the Smithsonian Institution in 1913 and never before displayed, are exquisite examples of early traditional mountain craftsmanship. Oil paintings hung throughout Wilson’s bedroom were painted by Ellen Axson Wilson.

When the room decoration was completed in late autumn 1913, First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson allowed the Southern Industrial Educational Association (S.I.E.A.) to have Washington photographer Harris Ewing take pictures of the president’s bed chamber. Two views of the room, selling for five cents each, were reproduced as souvenir post cards. Referring to the color of the blue dye, the caption on the postcard gave the room its lasting name: “The President’s Blue Mountain-Room at the White House.”

The president’s bedroom as originally decorated by First Lady Ellen Wilson in 1913.

A 1917 photograph of the president’s bedroom, always referred to as the “Blue Mountain Room,” frequently has been published in history books and articles about White House interiors. It has been assumed that the bed cover with the blue stripped edges was part of the 1913 decor. However, the honeycomb style cotton coverlet shown in the photograph and on exhibit actually belonged to the Wilsons before their occupancy of the White House (note differences between the two photographs). In 1899 Woodrow Wilson gave a speech in support of Berea College in Berea, Kentucky. Berea president, Dr. William Goodell Frost, sent the bed cover to Woodrow and Ellen Wilson as a thank you for that speech. The Frosts and Wilsons were friends, and President Wilson often spoke on behalf of Appalachian settlement school education. Frost is acknowledged as the first outsider to see the value of reviving Appalachian craft traditions.
Ellen Axson Wilson and the Southern Appalachian Crafts Revival

It is easy to surmise that Ellen Axson Wilson was familiar with mountain-made crafts in general, but the question naturally arises as to how one of the more civically concerned and influential First Ladies in American history, learned about specific Appalachian weavers. Where did she see examples of their work?

Out of necessity, artistic inclination, and determination for self sufficiency, Appalachian women wove at home long after northern women put aside hand looms in favor of factory-made textiles. After the Civil War, these women again relied on handwork skills to provide household necessities, but did not consider their output a marketable commodity. Nevertheless, by 1900 most of the crafts we now consider reflective of Southern Appalachian craftsmanship had fallen victim to industrial progress. Mass-produced goods were, however, of little value to a people who did not have the cash money necessary to buy them. The Southern Appalachian Arts and Crafts Revival was instituted to reteach handicraft skills that had been abandoned and provide families a way to earn badly needed cash by selling their “authentic early American crafts” to tourists and northern markets. Women like Josephine Mast and Elmeda Walker worked with missionary outsiders to revive craft traditions and teach others to use the nearly forgotten skills.

How the First Lady came to know the work of Josie Mast and Elmeda Walker is an interesting footnote in American history. A now little known organization, the Southern Industrial Educational Association, (S.I.E.A.), brought together Ellen Wilson and the two weavers. Allie Josephine Mast is recognized for her efforts on behalf of students alike. However, virtually overlooked for the past seventy years is the Southern Industrial Educational Association, Inc., headquartered in Washington, D.C., which made a significant contribution to the settlement school movement from 1905-1926. It was this organization that provided Ellen Axson Wilson the opportunity to use handmade fabrics in the president’s bed chamber.

The Southern Industrial Educational Association was founded by Martha Sawyer Gielow to provide financial support to schools that educated boys to be carpenters, builders, mechanics and agriculturists and girls in the homemaking skills of cooking, sewing, and weaving. Over the years, (S.I.E.A.) money helped mountain settlement schools in North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee. At schools, such as Kentucky’s Pine Mountain and Hindman schools, the money established student scholarships, paid teachers’ salaries, contributed to school building funds, and
provided a field secretary to coordinate the work.

Martha Gielow supported herself and two children in New York City by reading stories and singing songs of her native Alabama to audiences across the eastern United States and abroad. At the height of her career, Gielow attended a missionary meeting in Chautauqua, New York, where she became impassioned with the idea of providing a better education for Appalachian children. Gielow gave ardent speeches at meetings of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and other societies to raise money for her organization. Gielow successfully convinced prominent and wealthy Americans to serve as officers and trustees of the (S.I.E.A.) Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton University, North Carolina Episcopal Bishop Cheshire, Governor Warfield of Maryland, ex-Attorney General Charles Bonaparte, Senator John Sharpe Williams of Mississippi, and Honorable P. P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education were a few of the trustees in 1910. Seth Shephard, chief justice Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia, served as (S.I.E.A.) president for many years; and Joshua Evans, Jr. of the Riggs Bank was treasurer for eleven years. In the early years the Southern Industrial Educational Association formed auxiliary chapters in New York, Maryland, California, Virginia, Alabama, and Pennsylvania. Each auxiliary had its own craft sale, social events and membership drives. The New York auxiliary was the major financial contributor to the (S.I.E.A.) as a result of dedicated efforts by the president Mrs. Algernon Sydney Sullivan and the recording secretary Mrs. Livingston Rowe Schuyler. Though she was seventy years old when Gielow first approached her, humanitarian Mary Mildred Sullivan used her substantial influence to form the first auxiliary chapter and helped raise funds over the next eighteen years.

When Woodrow Wilson took office as president of the United States, First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson agreed to serve as honorary president of the Southern Industrial Educational Association, drawing national attention to the work of the association and the educational needs of Appalachian children. She personally underwrote several student scholarships each year and encouraged donations from such wealthy friends as Andrew Carnegie and Cleveland H. Dodge. After Mrs. Wilson's sudden death in

prominent and wealthy Americans to serve as officers and trustees of the (S.I.E.A.) Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton University, North Carolina Episcopal Bishop Cheshire, Governor Warfield of Maryland, ex-Attorney General Charles Bonaparte, Senator John Sharpe Williams of Mississippi, and Honorable P. P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education were a few of the trustees in 1910. Seth Shephard, chief justice Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia, served as (S.I.E.A.) president for many years; and Joshua Evans, Jr. of the Riggs Bank was treasurer for eleven years. In the early years the Southern Industrial

prominent and wealthy Americans to serve as officers and trustees of the (S.I.E.A.) Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton University, North Carolina Episcopal Bishop Cheshire, Governor Warfield of Maryland, ex-Attorney General Charles Bonaparte, Senator John Sharpe Williams of Mississippi, and Honorable P. P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education were a few of the trustees in 1910. Seth Shephard, chief justice Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia, served as (S.I.E.A.) president for many years; and Joshua Evans, Jr. of the Riggs Bank was treasurer for eleven years. In the early years the Southern Industrial

prominent and wealthy Americans to serve as officers and trustees of the (S.I.E.A.) Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton University, North Carolina Episcopal Bishop Cheshire, Governor Warfield of Maryland, ex-Attorney General Charles Bonaparte, Senator John Sharpe Williams of Mississippi, and Honorable P. P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education were a few of the trustees in 1910. Seth Shephard, chief justice Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia, served as (S.I.E.A.) president for many years; and Joshua Evans, Jr. of the Riggs Bank was treasurer for eleven years. In the early years the Southern Industrial
The Southern Industrial Educational Association held an annual craft Exchange from 1913 to 1926. Over the years, the types of products offered for sale expanded to include dresser scarves, a variety of woven coverlets, knotted and tufted cotton spreads, rag rugs, towels, turkey tail fans, hearth brooms, carved tea trays, nut bowls, gourds and a large collection of baskets. In the first seven years of the Exchange, $39,576.46 was remitted to mountain industrial workers. By June 1926, $97,950.44 had been paid to workers in nine schools, and eight hundred and thirty-three mountain homes.

On June 30, 1926 the board of trustees voted to disband the Southern Industrial Educational Association, Inc., having agreed that the association had accomplished a great deal of work during its twenty-one years; brought substantial public awareness to the mountains; and issues still needing to be addressed could be met by other organizations that had been established. The Southern Industrial Educational Association had paid out nearly $130,000.00 for individual student scholarships, salaries of teachers, and salaries of extension workers who went into Appalachian communities to teach the people weaving, cooking and other home industries.

The 1913 decoration of the Blue Mountain Room reflects in a small way two very distinct currents of early twentieth-century America. Today when Americans recall the achievements of President Woodrow Wilson, they are likely to mention that it was his vision of America's global influence which ultimately led to the establishment of the United Nations. However, the humanitarian interests of First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson helped launch the Arts and Crafts Revival that has continued unabated to this day, a movement that has not only enriched the people of Southern Appalachia but the nation.

Expert handweaver, spinner and dyer, Elmeda McHargue Walker, born in 1837, Elkin, NC. (Courtesy, Southern Highland Craft Guild)
Inside Cover: Sun, Moon and Stars rug woven by Josephine Mast, Valle Crucis, North Carolina for the 1913 Blue Mountain Room.