Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, the second wife of President Woodrow Wilson, was -- and is still today -- one of the most notable and controversial American first ladies. Perhaps most known for her administrative involvement after the president’s stroke while still in office, some have even gone so far as to call her our first female president. Born in Virginia to the prominent Bolling family, Edith Wilson met and married Woodrow Wilson in 1915. The two were very close, and Edith Wilson hardly left her husband’s side. Indeed, she was with him on his western campaign for the League of Nations, during which he became too ill to complete the trip. After the president’s life-altering stroke in September of 1919, Edith Wilson began to act as a presidential filter, deciding who could have contact with her husband and which political matters were important enough to concern him with. After his death in 1924, Edith Wilson continued to protect her husband by defending his reputation and managing his memory, eventually writing her own memoir -- titled *My Memoir* -- in 1938. Wilson outlived her husband by more than 37 years, and died on what would have been his 105th birthday.

There are a number of patterns in the historiography where Edith Wilson is concerned. Oftentimes, she is instrumentally used to study her husband. In histories of the first ladies, the primary focus tends to be her guilt or innocence. That is, the objective is often to determine the extent of her interference in political affairs. Very rarely is Edith Wilson the sole focus of a study. However, when she is, she is largely cast into a “good” or “bad” role, as either a controlling villain or as a one-dimensional heroine. Whatsmore, there is also a prominent argument in this field which holds that Edith Wilson’s decisions during the time of her husband’s incapacitation in office are moot, as she was acting as Woodrow Wilson himself would have acted. This denies Edith Wilson’s agency and reduces her personhood. Furthermore, these
arguments are perpetuating the dominant narrative during Edith Wilson’s own lifetime: that she overstepped her boundaries as first lady and became acting president. Regardless of the extent of the truth in this argument, the fixation on Edith Wilson’s guilt or innocence entails a lack of consideration of the choices that Wilson made and how she herself explained them. This study examines Edith Wilson’s tendency to exercise her agency within the realm of the personal while simultaneously working within contemporary social conventions. An examination of Edith Wilson’s ideology and attitudes and how she deployed her own agency through her writing reveals the rationalization and strategy behind her defensive memoir. Therefore, the basis of this study is My Memoir and its interconnectedness with previously published works to which Wilson was responding in her writing. How did she choose to defend herself, her husband, and the legacy of the Wilson Administration? What does this defense tell us about Edith Wilson’s sense of her own personhood? I have aimed to answer these questions by examining Edith Wilson in her own right: how she understood her role as first lady and wife, what criticism she chose to respond to, and how she did so. Through the study of the dialogue between My Memoir and other published works, there is the opportunity to obtain an understanding of what Wilson valued and how she went about correcting what she thought of as misconceptions that had been established before her writing concerning the events under the Wilson Administration.

I call it a dialogue between My Memoir and other memoirs that were published before Edith Wilson’s because she made it quite clear to whom she was responding to in her writing and named particular people throughout her work. In the study of this dialogue, we can better understand Edith Wilson’s perspective, thereby furthering an appreciation for the first lady herself. While it is true that Wilson’s memoir does contain some historical inaccuracies, this does
not mean that her work should be approached without sincerity as an historically valuable text. Even the historical inaccuracies may prove useful in yielding further understandings of Edith Wilson through her ideas and attitudes.

The published works that I have used to study Edith Wilson’s responses in *My Memoir* are those of Secretary of State Robert Lansing, Colonel Edward M. House, and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. Each of these works provide a different focus and aspect of the Wilson Administration which can be used to discern Edith Wilson’s attitudes through the examination of how she chose to respond to each of these texts.

I began with Robert Lansing, who provided the international perspective of the Treaty of Versailles and the Paris Peace Negotiations after WWI. His 1921 memoir, titled *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative*, is a defensive work that criticized the foundational ideas of the League of Nations and the character of Woodrow Wilson. By contrast, Edith Wilson was rarely explicit in her own memoir, although Lansing was one of the few people that she referred to by name. This comes as less of a surprise, when one considers the fact that Lansing was ultimately asked by President Wilson to resign in 1920 due to their differences, especially concerning the League. *My Memoir*’s account of Lansing’s resignation was quite different from the one provided in Lansing’s *The Peace Negotiations*. In Edith Wilson’s account, Woodrow Wilson had to remind the secretary that only the president had the power to call a Cabinet meeting, to which Lansing responded by tendering his resignation. However, in Lansing’s version of events, it was he who had to remind the president of Constitutional rights as Wilson drafted the League of Nations. Edith Wilson’s account paints Lansing as a traitor who took advantage of Woodrow Wilson’s absence to call a Cabinet meeting. Even worse, this occurred at
a vulnerable time for the League, which was at that time up for debate in the Senate. To comment on Lansing’s character, Edith Wilson utilized private remarks said to her by male figures of authority. In *My Memoir*, for instance, Wilson utilized disparaging remarks that criticized Lansing that were uttered by male political figures such as American Commissioner Henry White, who said that Lansing was a man of small character. In using White’s critique, Wilson passively advanced her own assessment of Lansing’s character while simultaneously distancing herself from any overly harsh remarks, providing her a modicum of deniability. As a woman who was not educated in politics and who grew up in a society that did not value outspokenness or leadership in women outside of the household, Wilson’s use of the male authoritative voice allowed her to not only make her own points but also to provide some legitimacy to those views.

Edith Wilson’s interactions with Woodrow Wilson’s personal adviser, Colonel Edward House, were quite different from those she had with Secretary Lansing. House has been identified as one of Edith Wilson’s victims by some authors, arguing that she was jealous of the close friendship House had with the president, or that she had never forgiven House’s involvement in trying to prevent her marriage to Woodrow Wilson in 1915. While *My Memoir* does contain some references to this instance, it is more likely that House’s later actions in 1919, in which House had made damaging compromises at the Paris Peace Conference in Woodrow Wilson’s absence, that had more influence when Edith Wilson was writing her memoir in the 1930s. Edith Wilson saw the fate of her husband and the League of Nations as intertwined -- he did in some sense sacrifice his health in favor of his work to campaign for the League -- and as House’s actions in Paris jeopardized the League, this would have been seen as a threat to
President Wilson and his work. Colonel House’s collaboration with Yale historian Charles
Seymour produced a four volume series titled *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* which were
published from 1926 to 1928, and consisted of House’s personal correspondence and diary notes
along with Seymour’s commentary. Likewise, Edith Wilson’s comments on House were
personal in nature and much more direct than those concerning Lansing. Rather than quoting
others, she directly commented on House’s character in her own words and gave accounts of her
past decisions not to inform the president of House’s more dubious actions -- such as his plan to
prevent their marriage, for instance. Here we can see Edith Wilson exercising her authority, in
both her personal comments on House and her decisions to protect her husband. In these
instances, Wilson was adhering to the societal norm which held that women had authority over
their own households, in the sense that they possessed moral authority and were seen as
caregivers and nurturers. It is this authority that is reflected in Wilson’s writing, as she recounted
her efforts to protect Woodrow Wilson’s emotional health from the knowledge of what she
considered House’s traitorous actions. The fact that Colonel House was a personal friend and not
an elected official allowed Edith Wilson to take more initiative in protecting her husband in this
way.

Finally, Edith Wilson’s political mind is revealed in how she defended her husband’s
League of Nations against Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who represented the most
prominent source of opposition to the policy. In 1925, Lodge released his own memoir, titled *The
Senate and the League of Nations*, in which he provided his commentary on the debate in the
Senate. Lodge was also endeavoring to defend himself against allegations that he was against the
League due to his personal animosity against the president. Despite this objective Lodge engaged
in a very critical examination of the character of Woodrow Wilson, along with his political commentary. For instance, he accused Woodrow Wilson of prioritizing the League of Nations so that he alone would be responsible for bringing about peace and consequently lost the chance to make a real difference in the world. In *My Memoir*, Wilson engaged in her own form of political commentary: she recognized Lodge as a key player in the defeat of the League of Nations in the U.S. and responded to the prominent idea that Woodrow Wilson was in some ways also culpable for the defeat of his policy due to the fact that he refused to compromise with the opposition by agreeing to the proposed Lodge reservations, which would have altered various articles of the League. Edith Wilson included her husband’s explanation for why he refused to allow any changes to the League and closely followed this with her own opinions, which were stated as facts. Woodrow Wilson was reported to have explained to his wife that the League could not be altered, as it had already been agreed upon in this form with the other nations at the Paris Peace Conference. Edith Wilson followed this explanation by writing that if every nation was given the chance to change the League, it would be chaos, and the League would become less effective for it. While it may be tempting to view this remark as an extension of Woodrow Wilson’s explanation, it was Edith Wilson’s decision to include this phrase and it is an example of her own political evaluation of this particular situation. The fact that her opinion agreed with that of her husband does not mean that it can be considered any less her own. *My Memoir* is more than a defense of Woodrow Wilson and his League of Nations; it reveals Edith Wilson’s political mind.

To conclude, I have examined Edith Wilson’s *My Memoir* as a means of discovering how Edith Wilson conceptualized her own personhood. This has been done through the study of her various responses to previously published works, each of which prompted a distinct defensive
strategy in Wilson’s writing. Whether she was using a male authoritative voice to formulate her own points, directly asserting her own authority as a protective wife, or employing her own political commentary, Edith Wilson was always conscious of societal expectations and maneuvered within those bounds to her own ends. *My Memoir* represents Edith Wilson’s efforts to protect and manage the memory and legacy of President Wilson, a political as well as a personal act. This is most clear in the final words of the first lady’s memoir, which she used to dedicate her work: “To my Husband, Woodrow Wilson, who helped me build from the broken timbers of my life a temple wherein are enshrined memories of his great spirit which was dedicated to the service of his God and humanity.” Nowhere in *My Memoir* is it clearer that Edith Wilson thought of her life as centered around her husband, especially when one considers the fact that her memoir begins with Wilson’s account of her family and childhood home but ends with the death of Woodrow Wilson and this dedication. Here we can see both the political and personal significance of her writing and how Edith Wilson used the personal to comment on the political: Woodrow Wilson was working in the service of the greater good and no one knew him better than his wife, who treasured her memories of him. However, as has been shown, Edith Wilson was a complex mix of agency and deference and someone who had a clear sense of self and knew how to maneuver within societal expectations for her own advantage in the writing of her defensive memoir.
My Memoir: An Exploration of Edith Wilson’s Personhood
Historiography
Chapter 1: Wilson’s Invocation of the Male Authoritative Voice


Chapter 2: Wilson’s Authoritative Voice


_Wilson and Edith at a Ball Game_, Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library Archives, Staunton, Virginia.
Chapter 3: Wilson’s Political Mind


“To my husband, Woodrow Wilson, who helped me build from the broken timbers of my life a temple wherein are enshrined memories of his great spirit which was dedicated to the service of his God and humanity.”