"of More Consequence Than the President": Frances Folsom Cleveland and the Role of First Lady in the Late Nineteenth Century

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"OF MORE CONSEQUENCE THAN THE PRESIDENT"

Frances Folsom Cleveland and the Role of First Lady in the Late Nineteenth Century

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Ellen E. Adams

2004
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Ellen E. Adams

Approved by the Committee, August 2004

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of first lady in the late nineteenth century by taking Frances Folsom Cleveland (first lady from 1886 to 1889 and 1893 to 1897) as an example. When she married President Grover Cleveland in 1886, she became an instant celebrity and a subject of popular curiosity as Americans tried to puzzle out how to define her: was she a public figure or a private individual? This question proved difficult to answer. Even as journalists praised Frances Cleveland’s accomplishments as a wife and a hostess, they also recognized that she, like other politicians’ wives, exerted influence in the realm of politics. However, many observers of and participants in Washington’s social scene were unwilling to acknowledge that women might be political actors in their own right; thus they thought and spoke of political wives’ activities in the language of sociability and duty. Frances Cleveland’s terms as first lady illuminate the ways in which ideological boundaries between the public and private realms, which drew a line between the male world of politics and the female world of domestic and social life, could be maintained even as she, as well as other politicians’ wives, subverted those supposedly rigid boundaries.
“OF MORE CONSEQUENCE THAN THE PRESIDENT”

Frances Folsom Cleveland and the Role of First Lady in the Late Nineteenth Century
INTRODUCTION

In June of 1898, the *Ladies Home Journal* published an article on former first lady Frances Cleveland to inaugurate its new series of biographical sketches. Though she had left the White House more than two years earlier, Frances Cleveland was still, the *Journal* declared, “the most popular and beloved woman in America.” “Pages of the Journal might easily be filled with anecdotes of the rare womanly kindness, charming grace and exquisite tact of Frances Folsom Cleveland,” anecdotes that would “clearly show why Mrs. Cleveland holds so firm a place in the affections of American women.” Among all her virtues, the most admired was her natural gift for performing small acts of kindness and personal attention. She embroidered handkerchiefs for each of the thirty guests at her daughters’ Christmas party; she fixed the ribbons of a girl’s ballgown “at the risk of spoiling her own dress”; she took an invalid neighbor out for a drive in her carriage every day.¹

Some of the stories have an almost fairy tale-like quality about them. For example, one day while shopping, an obsequious salesman attempted to leave his customer, “a very plainly clad Irish woman,” to wait on Mrs. Cleveland. She, however, insisted that he attend to the previous customer. The “abashed” salesman did as he was told, and the customer expressed her gratitude: “God bless you, mum, for your kindness to the likes of me. I dun’no who you are, but you ought to be a princess, so you should. Ye’re an illigant lady, so you are.”² Whether the story is true or not, it follows more or

² Ibid., 2.
less the same formula as many of the anecdotes told about Frances Cleveland, and thus
tells us what people expected of her. They believed she would show respect and
kindness to all people, regardless of social status, without appearing to condescend.
Those upon whom she bestowed her favors would then express surprise that she would
stoop to acknowledge and even show genuine interest in them, and they would
recognize that she was worthy of her high position and esteem—even if, like the Irish
woman, they did not know exactly who she was.

Almost from the time her engagement to Grover Cleveland was announced, the
idea that the American public had a personal relationship with the first lady, and that
she took an interest in them as individuals, was a common theme in newspaper and
magazine articles about Frances Folsom Cleveland. It is easy to see why this might be
so. Frances Folsom was an ordinary person: a little bit prettier, a little better-educated,
but for the most part not very different from many other upper-class white women. The
only difference, as most people saw it, lay in having been plucked from obscurity and
married to the most important man in the country—an event which was, in the words
used by nearly every journalist and writer at one time or another, “like a story book or
fairy tale.” It was both her obscurity and her ordinariness that made her such an object
of admiration. People were free to construct her in their own image of the perfect first
lady; everyone from advertisers to politicians felt free to use that image to serve their
own ends. This is not to suggest that she did not genuinely possess any of the qualities
attributed to her, only to point out that it can be difficult to say what the “real” Frances
Cleveland was like. For someone who spent so much time in the public eye, we know
remarkably little about what she thought about her role as first lady.

This study aims to uncover the meaning of Frances Cleveland’s popularity and
influence by examining two aspects of her life as first lady. In the first chapter, I look at

3 “Mr. Cleveland’s Devotion to His Ward,” *New York Tribune*, 3 June 1886: 5.
the wedding of Grover and Frances Cleveland, which took place on June 2, 1886, in the middle of Cleveland’s first term as president. What meanings did Americans attach to the event? How did they see Frances Cleveland and what did they expect of her as their first lady? Though it was never explicitly addressed as such, Frances Cleveland’s role as first lady represented something of a paradox: both conventional wife and public figure. Indeed, Frances Cleveland became just as much of a public figure as her husband. However, when her contemporaries spoke of her political influence, they veiled it in the language of sociability and wifely duty. Frances Cleveland’s tenure as first lady illustrates the ways in which ideological boundaries between the public and private realms, which drew a line between the male world of politics and the female world of domestic and social life, could be maintained even as she, as well as other politicians’ wives, subverted those supposedly rigid boundaries.

Frances Cleveland’s celebrity has not, until recently, been seriously examined by historians (no biography was even available until Stephen F. Robar’s *Frances Clara Folsom Cleveland* was published in 2002). Nineteenth-century books about first ladies, such as *The Ladies of the White House* by Laura C. Holloway (1886) and *From Lady Washington to Mrs. Cleveland* by Lydia L. Gordon (1888), and memoirs of Washington society, such as Mary Logan’s *Thirty Years in Washington* (1901), resemble the homilies in the *Ladies Home Journal*. They focused on the romantic, sentimental aspects of the Clevelands’ wedding and Frances Cleveland’s success as White House hostess. As Catherine Allgor has argued, these authors wrote out of the “conviction that women’s social work was important,” but they lacked the “language or framework to be able to say how or why women mattered,” and were often forced to resort to “formulaic” descriptions of graciousness and refinement.⁴ These early accounts of

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Frances Cleveland recognized her public influence, but they emphasized her role as wife and mother and attributed her popularity to her ideally feminine characteristics: she was beautiful and charming, but her true attraction lay in her kind, gentle, and patient nature.

Recently, scholars have begun to analyze the ways in which Frances Cleveland’s fame was used to achieve the Democratic party’s political goals. In her article “Campaign Appeals to Women,” Edith P. Mayo discusses the history of campaign objects that were designed to appeal to women. Such objects appeared as early as 1828, when sewing boxes and hair combs were produced bearing likenesses of John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. By the time of the Grover Cleveland-Benjamin Harrison race of 1888, women could purchase a staggering array of household items advertising their political preferences: pitchers, plates, glasses, napkins, pillowcases. They could also wear scarves and pendants featuring portraits of their favored candidate. What was different about the campaign of 1888 was that it marked the first time the image of a first lady appeared in campaign material. Frances Cleveland’s picture appeared on the usual household ceramics, as well as sheet music, handkerchiefs, playing cards, and posters. Campaign articles of a domestic nature, especially those bearing the image of Frances Cleveland, directly appealed to women. Campaign organizers thus recognized that women were interested in politics while attempting to confine that interest to the private sphere and the influence they could exert on their husbands. However, once it had been acknowledged that women had a stake in political issues and had been encouraged to promote the interests of the party, it was perhaps inevitable that they would take steps to form their own organizations through which they could participate publicly in campaigns.5

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Frances Cleveland’s role in the election of 1888 also marked a shift in the Democratic party’s campaign strategy. As Rebecca Edwards discusses in *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era*, Republicans had always presented themselves as the party of family values. Their candidates were temperate men who accepted the moral guidance of their wives, while they painted Democrats as licentious and immoral. Democrats themselves tended to portray their candidates as “aggressive men free of feminine ties,” and supported the idea that men should hold complete authority in the home. Cleveland’s marriage and apparent transformation into a devoted family man (he had previously been castigated for fathering an illegitimate child) provided Democrats with an excellent opportunity to appropriate the Republicans’ rhetoric of wholesome family life as the foundation of American society. Democrats created their own version of the domestic ideal, centered around a woman who—like Frances Cleveland—devoted herself to home and family but left politics to her husband. They contrasted this ideal with Republican women, who they characterized as shrewish, ambitious, and exerting excessive influence over their husbands.6

The ways in which other people used Frances Cleveland’s name and image for their own purposes—from advertisers to Democratic women who started “Frances Cleveland Clubs”—have been noted and discussed by historians. But what was the significance of her own actions as first lady? For Frances Cleveland, the public and private spheres were never separate; her activities as White House hostess were as much political as they were social. The second chapter discusses the meaning of the rituals performed by Frances Cleveland and the members of her social circle. Frances Cleveland always claimed to have no interest in politics, yet her contemporaries

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believed that she had a great deal of political influence. The first lady and her acquaintances may not have been making speeches or campaigning for women’s suffrage, but their teas and receptions were political as well as social events. Frances Cleveland and other politicians’ wives held a unique position in Washington, one that politicians, journalists, and writers on Washington society acknowledged to have an important political dimension. Aside from the personal influence they had upon their husbands, as hostesses they had the opportunity to bring influential people together and direct them toward particular goals.

Historians have done much to complicate the concept of separate spheres. They have asked questions about, among other things, to what extent women participated in the creation of the ideology of separate spheres, and indeed, whether separate spheres really existed outside the realm of ideology. Historians have also explored women’s political involvement in the late nineteenth century, expanding our definition of politics and considering whether women had a separate political culture. In this thesis, I join in these conversations by exploring Frances Cleveland’s dual public and private roles as first lady and demonstrating how her social activities, like those of other politicians’ wives, not only had political implications but were themselves political acts. In late-nineteenth century Washington, D.C., men and women continually crossed the line between the public and private spheres, sometimes making the distinction between the two all but meaningless. As the discussions that took place in the press at the time of the Clevelands’ wedding illustrate, Americans were well aware of the possibilities that a woman’s connection to the realm of government through her husband could offer. Even

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as they embraced Frances Cleveland as a symbol of domestic virtue, they wondered what she would do with her newfound power.
CHAPTER I

"THE BRIDE OF THE WHITE HOUSE";

PUBLICITY, PRIVACY, AND THE WEDDING OF FRANCES FOLSOM

AND GROVER CLEVELAND

In late March 1886, President Grover Cleveland wrote to his sister about his approaching marriage to Frances Folsom. Cleveland and Frances, the twenty-one-year-old daughter of his former law partner and unofficial ward, had become engaged in August of 1885, shortly after her graduation from Wells College. She had then departed for a winter of European travel, and was scheduled to arrive back in New York at the end of May. Cleveland wanted to be married as soon as possible after Frances’s return. “The quicker it can be done the better,” Cleveland wrote. “If the event was delayed too long after her return the talk and gossip which would certainly be stirred up could not fail to be very embarrassing to her.” He went on to explain that he wished the wedding to be a private affair, which only family and members of the cabinet would attend. Cleveland acknowledged that “a more democratic and popular thing” would be a public reception, but he did not wish to subject Frances to “such an ordeal.” He assured his sister that he did not “want to be churlish and mean or peculiar for the sake of being peculiar,” but just the same he was “determined that the American Sovereigns shall not interfere with a thing so purely personal to me.”

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Cleveland’s concerns about “talk and gossip” were not, as it turned out, unfounded. By the middle of April, rumors about the president’s engagement to an unknown woman were everywhere a topic of conversation. The New York Times reported almost daily the latest information (and misinformation) on this “all-absorbing topic.” Cleveland refused to either confirm or deny the rumors, but the newspapers concluded that “silence is to be taken for consent” and engaged in endless speculation about when and where the wedding would take place (and to whom he would be married—Frances and her mother were both suggested as candidates).10 “Before this letter reaches you,” the New York Tribune’s Washington correspondent quipped, “the quidnuncs and wiseacres of the town, having already settled upon the person of the young lady to whom the President is to surrender his hand and heart, will have fixed the date for the marriage, determined whether it shall take place in church or at the White House, and decided upon the length and duration of the wedding trip.”11

Perhaps in response to this rash of speculation, Cleveland wrote again to his sister on April 19, saying that he was “decidedly of the opinion now that the affair should be more quiet even than at first contemplated.” He was concerned that Frances and her family would “be subjected from the time of their arrival to the impudent inquisition of newspaper correspondents, and if this latter dirty gang were not entirely satisfied, our friends would probably be dished up in a very mean way; and the newspapers and the people have acted in such a mean way that I don’t care to gratify either of them.” He thought that the “good people of the country” would understand his desire for privacy and to “dispense with all nonsense and flummery,” but seemed to have little hope that the newspapers would do the same.12 Throughout his presidency, Cleveland would struggle

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12 Cleveland to Hoyt, 19 April 1886, Letters of Grover Cleveland, 106-07.
to keep his personal affairs private, and to do what proved to be even more difficult: to shield his wife from the glare of publicity. Cleveland may have had his “heart set on making Frank a sensible, domestic American wife,” but the press and the people were determined to make her a celebrity.\textsuperscript{13}

Though Frances Folsom Cleveland was, almost from the moment she entered the White House, declared one of the most popular first ladies in American history, historians have given little consideration to the significance of her popularity, or to the larger debate over publicity and privacy in which it was embedded. Grover Cleveland was not the only person who worried about the degree to which the public and the press intruded upon his private affairs. The sheer volume of the wedding coverage, and the extreme ends to which reporters were willing to go to get information, led some journalists to conclude that the press had gone too far, and they began to look more carefully at their own practices and to consider seriously what limits should be placed on the press in their dealings with personal affairs. The Clevelands’ wedding thus became a vehicle for self-scrutiny and self-criticism (or at least scrutiny and criticism of one’s journalistic rivals) as the press debated various issues. How much of his private life could an elected official legitimately keep from the public? What did the people have a right to know? What about the wife of an official—should she be considered a public figure? The president’s wife fell into an ambiguous position. As a woman, her proper place was in the home, but it was undeniable that being the “Mistress of the White House” was not quite the same thing as being the mistress of a private home. The president’s wife—despite Cleveland’s assertions to the contrary—did have a public role, and therefore could be considered fair game for the scrutiny of the press.

People were quick to capitalize on Frances Cleveland’s popularity, using her dual role as public wife to their own advantage. From the start, editors realized that stories

\textsuperscript{13} Cleveland to Hoyt, 21 March 1886, in ibid., 104.
about Frances Cleveland would help to sell newspapers and magazines, and entrepreneurs used her name and image to promote a variety of products, from soap to hats to cigars. However, she would also be used to further political and social causes. For example, middle- and upper-class white women such as those who founded Frances Cleveland Clubs recognized her as a figure and a symbol who could be used to legitimize their own public activities. She was celebrated for her conventional feminine qualities—beauty, charm, sweetness—and portrayed in the popular press as the ultimate example of idealized American domesticity. Depicted in this way, she was not threatening to the established social order and gender conventions, despite her public role, and could safely be used towards ends that might otherwise seem subversive.

The first rumors that President Cleveland was engaged to be married generated a great deal of interest. There had been no first lady since 1881, and the very idea of a White House wedding was an exciting one. Cleveland, a forty-nine-year-old bachelor, had never shown much interest in social affairs and was not known for his personal charm. The discovery that a romance had blossomed between the president and his ward—indeed, that he had waited for young Frances to grow up—transformed Cleveland into a much more appealing figure and proved practically irresistible to a sentimental public. And, as the first wedding of a president while in office, it was looked upon as an occasion worthy of everyone’s attention. Because of the historic nature of the event, it seemed regrettable that Cleveland was so determined not to admit reporters or artists to the wedding. “It ought,” the New York Times declared, “to be handed down in picture just as it will be seen by the 20 or 30 persons who are to have the privilege of witnessing it.... The first wedding of a President in office and in the White House is a subject that is entitled to be seen and described for the benefit of generations to come.”¹⁴ Indeed, there seemed to be a hint of suspicion about the president’s secrecy. Marriage is, by its very

nature, a public expression of a private relationship. And secrecy could be seen as un-American, antithetical to the openness that was crucial in a democracy. The *New York World* criticized the president for his lack "of Washingtonian truthfulness, Jeffersonian simplicity, and Jacksonian directness."\(^{15}\) If the president chose to keep his marriage private, what other secrets might he be keeping from the American people?

Most newspapers, however, chose not to dwell on that troubling question. While they were obviously disappointed at being barred from the wedding, the press gave a positive interpretation to the president's desire for a small, private ceremony by praising him for his good taste in avoiding any form of ostentation. In contrast to the weddings of European royalty, the president's was characterized by "a democratic simplicity." It was "as plain as that of the least ostentatious citizen."\(^{16}\) The president and his bride had set an admirable example with their ceremony:

> Every undue display tending to draw public attention to such private and wholly personal matters becomes the height of bad taste and vulgarity. The quiet, modest marriage of our President, while it did not neglect any of the requirements of society, nevertheless presented to that society an excellent precedent, to leave display to those whose feelings favor such a course, and follow the refined and cultivated taste that would establish a more delicate conception than has lately prevailed.\(^{17}\)

Such commentary effectively allowed the press to have it both ways: they could talk as much as they liked about the wedding, exposing its every detail to the public, while still appearing to respect Cleveland's desire for privacy.

Once he had revealed (however unintentionally) something of his personal life, the public seemed to embrace Cleveland and to look upon him as an ordinary person, not

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\(^{15}\) Quoted in *New York Tribune*, 1 June 1886: 4.

\(^{16}\) "The President's Marriage," *Harper's Bazar* 19 (26 June 1886), 414.

\(^{17}\) *Arthur's Home Magazine* 54 (Aug. 1886), 636.
as an official personage. As the *Times* put it, "It is not so much the President as the happy man who is followed."\(^{18}\) The *Chicago Daily News* observed,

> There is something characteristically American about the merry yet respectful, jesting yet sincere, interest our people take in the nuptials of the president. Every bit of gossip concerning his courtship and the life, appearance, and character of his intended is discussed with as much avidity as if she were to be the bride of some personal friend. The people do not stand afar off and watch the preparations for the marriage as if it were to be a pageant of royalty. They are not restrained by any awe of the president’s high office from showing their curiosity about his personal affairs. They feel that he owes his elevation to their suffrage, and they wish him joy and tender him advice with all the freedom of equals.\(^{19}\)

Newspapers and magazines almost universally declared that the public’s interest in the wedding was a sincere expression of goodwill, and was an admirable example of Americans’ kind natures and egalitarian sensibilities. It was asserted that if the president was “annoyed by the publicity given to the smallest details of his approaching marriage,” he must also be “gratified at the interest the country at large takes in it.”\(^{20}\)

Interest in the president’s wedding, it was frequently noted, crossed sectional and party lines. “On this occasion,” the *Tribune* declared, “we are all enthusiastic Democrats—or at least all sympathetic indorsers of the latest phase of the ‘policy’ of the Administration.” The wedding was a time for people to set aside “the tariff, the currency and other cold-blooded causes of division” and to “unite as one affectionate family in giving expression to their heartfelt wishes for the happiness of the President and his

bride.” Even “those of us who expect to furnish the White House with a new tenant within a few years, still wish Mr. Cleveland and his bride to find it a happy abode.”

The satirical magazine *Puck* gave its own commentary on this apparent party unity in a poem:

God rest you, Mr. Cleveland,

May nothing you dismay--

Mugwump and Spoilsman, Rep. and Dem.

Hail you this happy day.

The sweet alliance which you make

No party disapproves--

E’en politicians will admit

You’ve made the best of moves.

When Cleveland was elected in 1884, he became the first Democratic president since the Civil War, and his victory had raised fears, particularly in the north. He had also been accused during the campaign of fathering an illegitimate child. Cleveland’s marriage was a reassuring act that eased tensions between parties, and helped unite sectional factions within his own party. It also effectively erased that earlier scandal and made Cleveland into a respectable family man who could be admired by all Americans.

But much of the wedding’s unifying power must be credited to Frances, who was a universally appealing figure. Apart from her personal qualities, as a symbol she seemed to offer something for everybody. As a young woman married to an older man, she crossed generational lines. She had a college education, but had taken up a domestic role.

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23 “Puck’s Congratulations,” *Puck* 19 (9 June 1886), 233.
Born after the Civil War, she seemed to represent a new start for the country, which was united in its admiration for her.24 This sentiment was neatly expressed in a punning advertisement produced by the Merrick Thread Company, which showed Frances and Grover Cleveland’s portraits surrounded by a heart made of thread, with a caption that read “The Thread That Binds the Union.”25

As the day of the wedding drew closer, much of the public’s attention shifted from the president to Frances. Even more so than Cleveland, she could be seen as one of them, and people seemed to take a proprietary interest in her. No longer just “The President’s Bride,” she belonged to them as “The Nation’s First Lady.” Newspaper stories made much of the “sudden, almost magical, change from the quiet, uneventful, ordinary life of an American girl to the widespread celebrity and National interest,” and her “elevation,” as the president’s wife, “to the highest social position in the land.”26 And it was not enough for them to read about her in the newspapers. They wanted, if at all possible, to see her for themselves. From the time of her arrival in New York, her every move was followed, not only by reporters, but by people eager to catch a glimpse of the woman who would soon be their first lady. So great was the public’s interest in Frances that she and her mother had to be brought to Washington secretly on a special train late at night. A Tribune correspondent reported that when “the train was well across the Newark marshes, Miss Folsom breathed a sigh of relief and seemed to be glad to have at last escaped the gaze of curious eyes.”27 But this was, of course, only a temporary escape. When she arrived in Washington, the crowds were there again. On the day of the wedding, between two hundred and two hundred fifty people gathered around the White

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25 Mayo, “Campaign Appeals to Women,” 133.
26 “Mr. Cleveland’s Devotion to His Ward,” New York Tribune, 3 June 1886: 5.
House, which was guarded by twenty-four policemen and detectives. Six officers were assigned to watch the main entrance, and to make sure that “no one not bidden to the marriage went any further.” No serious disruptions were reported, though “all sorts of tricks and devices were resorted to by men and women whose devouring ambition it as to get into the President’s house and witness the marriage ceremony,” including one man who offered John Philip Sousa fifty dollars to let him come in as a member of the band.

Those who had no opportunity to see the bride in person had to be content with the pictures published in numerous magazines in the weeks after the wedding. Though artists had been forbidden to witness the ceremony, they produced illustrations based upon the descriptions in the official report issued by the White House. Harper’s Weekly, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, and Harper’s Bazar all produced their own renditions of the event, which they printed along with portraits of the bride, groom, and wedding guests, and the rooms in the White House in which the festivities had taken place. Harper’s Bazar perhaps scored the greatest coup in being given permission to print a facsimile of one of the wedding invitations, a picture of the box used to distribute pieces of wedding cake, and a “SUPERB DOUBLE-PAGE ILLUSTRATION of MRS. GROVER CLEVELAND, photographed from life.” The New York Times reported that as “there had been an enormous number of inquiries for pictures of the bride in her wedding gown…after the matter had been talked over at the White House Mrs. Cleveland was permitted to have a well known photographer come to the White House.” Though the pictures did not appear until the end of July, Harper’s was confident that “all the facts and incidents of the wedding on June 2 at the White House are still interesting and will continue to be discussed with animation for months to come. While a great deal has been

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28 Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 12 June 1886, 262.
30 “Pictures of the President’s Bride,” New York Times, 8 July 1886: 5. The wording of the article suggests that Frances Cleveland herself proposed producing an official portrait that would be made available to the public.
written about the ceremony, there are many circumstances connected with it that may be referred to with some confidence that an account of them will please.\textsuperscript{31}

Newspapers and magazines must have realized immediately that a White House wedding, and particularly the wedding of a young and attractive woman, was just the sort of thing bound to appeal to their readers, especially women. The large number of stories about the wedding and Frances Cleveland were, to some degree, a calculated decision made in order to boost circulation by pulling in female readers. When Joseph Pulitzer took over the \textit{New York World} in 1883, for example, he made a concerted effort to attract working- and lower-middle-class women readers. Pulitzer evidently felt compelled to recognize advances in women’s education and public influence, even though these changes were almost entirely confined to white middle- and upper-class women, not the readers of the \textit{World}. At the same time, he believed that to address issues such as women’s formal political participation or their access to male-dominated professions would have alienated working-class men (and some women), particularly immigrants, who tended to hold more conservative views about gender conventions. Thus the \textit{World}, in targeting women readers, gave them a steady diet of articles about fashion, beauty, society, and etiquette, interspersed with occasional homilies on the virtues and enviable position of the “American Girl.”\textsuperscript{32} Features on famous women, such as socialites and Cabinet wives, were especially popular, perhaps because they allowed Pulitzer to combine his two objectives effectively. A feature on Washington hostesses, for example, promised to tell readers “how they look, act, and what they wear,” but articles also acknowledged that “some of the shrewdest politicians of Washington are of the gentler sex.”\textsuperscript{33} In this way the \textit{World} was able to pay tribute to women’s influence while

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} “Mrs. Grover Cleveland,” \textit{Harper’s Bazar} 19 (24 July 1886), 486.
\item \textsuperscript{33} \textit{New York World}, 29 Mar. 1885: 18, and 9 Nov. 1884: 10, quoted in Juergens, 155-56.
\end{itemize}
reinforcing the convention that such influence should be exercised within the domestic and social sphere.

Articles about Frances Cleveland focused largely on her appearance and manners. Her beauty was described in glowing terms, and every detail of her clothing reported. Several newspapers printed long and exhaustive lists of all the dresses in her trousseau. The wedding gown was of special interest, and was the focal point of many of the articles about the wedding. The New York Times rhapsodized, “A description of the wedding dress as a fashion-maker would call off its essentials would be utterly inadequate to give an idea of the warmth and glow that it diffused among the romance and poetry of tonight’s associations.” Nonetheless, reporters did their best to describe the dress accurately for the benefit of their readers. The portrait printed in Harper’s Bazar was praised because it not only “brought out the features of the bride,” but also showed “the pretty orange blossom garniture of the elaborate bodice perfectly.” And Frances Cleveland was more than a pretty face: she had a “quiet poise and settled manner...which give her a dignity not often seen in one of her years.” Though she had little experience in society, she “adapted herself to the etiquette easily and naturally.” She even managed to jump from a train so daintily that only the tips of her boots showed.

While the press was willing to excuse the public’s curiosity as “altogether the expression of friendly concern, not vulgar impertinence or a desire to meddle in anybody’s private affairs,” they were not so lenient with members of their own profession. In the 1880s, with the rise of sensational journalism, people began to look more critically at the press and to consider the proper boundaries of the media. Discussions of sensationalism became intertwined with issues of privacy as journalists

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35 “Pictures of the President’s Bride,” New York Times, 8 July 1886: 5.
36 “Mr. Cleveland’s Devotion to His Ward,” New York Tribune, 3 June 1886: 5.
and critics tried to define what the public had a right to know. The press itself was thought to be largely responsible for generating and fueling the public’s interest in events such as the president’s wedding. Readers could not help it if the press created an “insatiable” appetite for news. Thus it became the responsibility for the press to regulate its own activities and to check itself when it went too far and became too sensational or intrusive. The president’s wedding, a story of national importance and fraught with tensions over publicity and privacy, was especially likely to provoke such criticism. Weekly and monthly magazines, which saw themselves as directed to a respectable, middle-class audience, and relied less upon firsthand reportage and sensationalism to sell issues, could afford to condemn the tactics of the daily press. *Arthur’s Home Magazine* felt that “the comments of the press have been illimitable, their persistence as newsgatherers unpleasantly conspicuous.” “The newspapers have been full of [gossip],” *Peterson’s Magazine* observed, “often, unfortunately, going to the verge of good taste.” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* commented upon the situation, with a cartoon that showed Cleveland’s adviser Daniel Lamont (“cupid’s messenger”) pursued by “reportorial musquitos” labeled “Herald,” “Sun,” and “Tribune.” The following week, another cartoon showed that the press did not stop with the wedding, but also tried to intrude on “The ‘Quiet’ Honeymoon at Deer Park.”

Joseph P. Bishop, in an article in *The Forum*, perhaps expressed this idea most strongly. Bishop saw the newspapers’ treatment of the wedding as the culmination of an alarming trend that had been “growing steadily for several years, and which found in this

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43 *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 5 June 1886, 256; 12 June 1886, 272.
event an opportunity to lift itself into national prominence.” Journalists—from “not merely a few but nearly all the prominent journals of the country”—had lost all sense of propriety and had no compunction about intruding on and exposing people’s private affairs, and had become a “positive terror to respectable citizens.” If one good thing came out of the whole unpleasant affair, Bishop said, it was that it finally “called public attention to the intolerable lengths to which the modern system of press espionage has been carried.” Bishop hoped that once public opinion was turned against sensational and intrusive journalism, newspapers would re-evaluate their conduct and realize they had a responsibility to commit to higher standards.44

In some ways, Frances Cleveland’s sudden emergence onto the public stage with her marriage was not all that different from the experience of other young white upper-class women. The rise of society journalism during this period turned elite white women into celebrities, and as “models of genteel femininity,” their every action “came under close scrutiny by the print media.” In the 1880s, elite weddings in particular were becoming more public and publicized. The upper class wished to use weddings to display and affirm their social and economic status, but in doing so they also exposed themselves to the view—and, potentially, the criticism—of the press and the public. For middle- and upper-class white women, weddings were, at least symbolically, their first formal appearance in public, a rite of passage that marked their transition from girlhood to womanhood.45 A young woman who was ready for marriage was supposed to have “been graduated in all the accomplishments and knowledge necessary” to take up a position in the wider world of society.46 In that sense, Frances Cleveland’s experience was different from other elite women only in that she was relatively unknown before her

marriage, and in the much greater degree to which she was subject to public attention because of the prominent position of the man she married.

As Frances was still in Europe at the time that rumors of an engagement began to circulate, and because Cleveland refused to give out any information about her or the wedding, the newspapers had to do their own investigations using whatever sources they could obtain. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Frances’s uncle, X. F. Harmon, said that he thought “it will be very embarrassing for her to know of the thousands of varied rumors that are being circulated regarding her. It will be especially so if she happens to see any of the newspaper cuts that have been printed over her name.”

For the most part, journalists’ accounts of Frances’s life and of the course of her relationship with Cleveland were accurate, but for a woman to be talked about and have her picture in the newspaper at all still bore a hint of scandal.

Newspapers had to walk a delicate line in presenting information they knew their readers were eager to read in a manner that would offend no one’s sense of propriety. An editorial in the *Chicago Daily News*, for example, castigated one of the city’s other papers for calling Frances “that young woman,” instead of referring to her as a “lady.” “Miss Folsom is deserving of respect because of her character and unassuming demeanor as an American girl. The fact that the president of the United States has chosen her for his bride should not be, even to the boorish, an excuse for forgetting that she is

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47 “The President’s Sweetheart: Miss Folsom’s Uncle Talks about Mr. Cleveland’s Intended Bride,” *New York Times*, 27 April 1886: 4.
48 The widespread distribution of pictures of Frances Cleveland—particularly in unauthorized advertisements—would continue to be a sensitive issue. For a woman’s picture to be made available to the public put her in the same category as women of questionable reputation. (Duke Cigarettes made this connection plain when they included a Mrs. Cleveland card with their set of actress tobacco cards.) In 1888, a bill was introduced in Congress that would have made any individual or corporation “who shall publicly exhibit, use or employ the likeness or representation of any female” without her consent “guilty of high misdemeanor.” However, the bill was never passed, a tacit recognition of the fact that while Frances Cleveland was technically a private citizen, she was also a public figure whose image could be used without her permission. Stephen F. Robar, *Frances Clara Folsom Cleveland* (New York: Nova History Publications, 2002), 42.
defenseless against innuendoes." This, to be sure, expressed unusually delicate sensibilities. When Cleveland issued a statement saying that the reports about his marriage were "a shame and an outrage upon all the privacies and decencies of life," and that "the press should find something better to do than to be pitching into an unprotected girl in this brutal way," the Tribune responded, "Isn't this language much stronger than the occasion calls for?"²⁰

This exchange points to the central disagreement under debate. Cleveland felt that he was under no obligation to share the details of his private life with the public. His personal relationships, especially with his wife, were outside the realm of what the public needed or had a right to know. But the press disagreed. They did not see their interest in the wedding and in Frances Cleveland as intrusive. Nor was it merely sensationalism or idle curiosity. Americans had legitimate reasons for wanting to know something about the president's wife. An editorial in the New York Times laid out the issue thus:

The public interest in the marriage that is to be solemnized this evening is an entirely legitimate feeling....The wife of the President of the United States, it may be said, is an official personage. Every American man and woman wishes to think well of her; every American man and woman wishes to know something about her. In a democratic republic...the character of the mistress of the White House [is] a subject of more general importance than it would otherwise be....The social success of an Administration...counts for a great deal in its political success, and this social success depends much more upon the President's wife than upon

²⁰ New York Tribune, 24 April 1886: 4. Cleveland's statement is quoted in this editorial. Presumably, as an unmarried woman without a father or brothers, Frances was considered especially vulnerable to rumors that might damage her reputation. Cleveland was no doubt trying to protect himself as well, knowing that to some degree he would be judged by the woman he married.
the President....So long as our politics have any social element...the
President’s wife...will continue to be a personage.51

It was assumed that the first lady would exercise a great deal of influence on politics,
both through her husband, and through her social role as White House hostess. Therefore
it was not unreasonable for the people to want to know something about her background,
opinions, and how she might be likely to use her influence.

*Harper’s Bazar* reported in July 1886 that Frances Cleveland “spends much time
during the evenings, when the White House is closed to visitors on business, in the
library with the President, and with a woman’s aptness and a wife’s sympathy is rapidly
learning to be interested in many matters of serious public concern.”52 This statement
seems rather at odds with Cleveland’s own opinion that “a woman should not bother her
head about political parties and public questions, and she should be content to rule in the
domain of the house.”53 Frances Cleveland always professed not to be interested in
politics, and would “laughingly divert the conversation to books, or people, or perhaps
the drama” if the subject came up.54 She was reluctant to acknowledge openly that she
had a public role apart from her husband. For example, in September 1886, she was
asked to participate in a ceremony in which she would present flags to the New York Fire
Department. She declined the invitation, based, she said, on her “unwillingness to
assume that I, as the wife of the President, ought to participate in a public ceremony in
which he takes no part.”55

However, this is not to say that Frances Cleveland did not realize that she had a
profound influence on her husband’s political career, or that she never found herself

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53 Quoted in Robar, *Frances Clara Folsom Cleveland*, 40
55 Not Without Her Husband: Why Mrs. Cleveland Declines to Present the Firemen’s Flags,” *New York
Times*, 7 Sept. 1886: 2.
taking on a public role. By all accounts, from the time she entered the White House, she “captivated all whom she met.” “Imposing in appearance, beautiful in face, gracious in manners,” she won “universal admiration”\(^{56}\) and was able to “subdue, by her winning qualities, to her own mild sway even the bitterest political opponents.”\(^{57}\) But she also had an effect outside of Washington politics and society. Newspaper reports of the first lady’s activities frequently noted that women made up the majority of the crowds who came out to see her. During a trip to Boston, for example, even the women of the exclusive Back Bay neighborhood were not above employing opera glasses and telescopes in their attempts to get a glimpse of the first lady. The \textit{New York Times} reported, “The jam of women around the entrance to Trinity Church as Mrs. Cleveland came out was something terrible for the masculine gender to contemplate, and one young lady, breathless with running and pushing, apparently voiced the feminine sentiment when she said in a stage whisper, ‘She’s worth running to see.’”\(^{58}\)

Reporters tended to treat women as a general category and rarely specified the race or class of the women who made up these crowds, or speculated as to the nature of the “feminine sentiment” that prompted them to seek out Frances Cleveland. However, occasional reports of the first lady’s correspondence or interactions with specific groups of women can give us some idea of who turned to her for support and what causes they felt she could aid them in. The Moral Educational Society of Chicago, for example, praised Frances Cleveland for her modesty and expressed its thanks that she, in her “conspicuous position, displayed a womanly delicacy in the non- adoption of décolleté dress.” These middle-class white women felt that immodest dress led “to a disparaging

\(^{56}\) \textit{Mrs. John A. [Mary] Logan, Thirty Years in Washington, or Life and Scenes in Our National Capital} (Hartford, Conn.: A.D. Worthington and Co., 1901), 704.


estimate of womankind,” and to have the president’s wife support their cause was seen as an important step.59 The Women’s Christian Temperance Union presented Frances Cleveland with a microscope.60 And the members of the LeVert College literary society named their organization after the first lady, citing her as a “model” for young women who wished to “fill [their] position in life as nobly and as grandly as you are filling yours.”61 These reports suggest that middle- and upper-class white women associated Frances Cleveland with causes such as moral reform and women’s education. As they shared the same class, race, and educational background, these women perhaps assumed that the first lady would also share their interests.

In October 1888, the “women and girls” employed in the Keystone Watch-Case Company of Philadelphia presented Frances Cleveland with a watch they had made, along with a letter praising her for “the advanced position” she had taken toward the working women of the country, and expressing “their gratitude that she has so unfailingly used her influence in their behalf.”62 It is not clear whether Frances Cleveland ever stated publicly that she supported or opposed specific political measures that would have affected working women, though it seems unlikely that she did. However, she welcomed working women at her Saturday afternoon receptions. The Ladies Home Journal reported that she reprimanded a Cabinet member’s wife who made a disparaging remark about the “masses,” and insisted that the women who assisted her at public receptions treat guests who were not “society people” with as much respect as those who were.63

According to another anecdote, a White House official urged the first lady to cancel the Saturday afternoon public receptions because “about half of all the women who came

62 “Presentation to Mrs. Cleveland,” New York Times, 31 Oct. 1888: 3. It should be noted, however, that the wife of the company president presented the watch to Frances Cleveland, though the employees evidently wrote the letter themselves.
63 “The Anecdotal Side of Mrs. Cleveland,” 1.
Saturday afternoon are clerks from the department stores and others—a great rabble of shop-girls.” White House receptions, the official implied, were not intended for such women. Frances Cleveland knew quite well that Saturday afternoon was the only time that most working women were free to attend her receptions, and declared that she would continue the custom “so long as there were any store clerks, or self-supporting women and girls who wished to come to the White House.”64 It was perhaps not politically expedient for Frances Cleveland to make a direct statement concerning public policy, but by welcoming working women to the White House, she could effectively draw attention to issues she felt needed to be addressed.

However, not all women received even grudging acceptance at White House receptions. As “Louise,” the society correspondent for the Washington Bee, an African-American newspaper, noted in her report on the wedding, “We are precluded from enjoying the hospitalities of the [Executive] Mansion.” Nonetheless, she expressed hope that the new first lady, who she described as a woman of “sublime intellect,” would use her influence on behalf of Washington’s black citizens, which suggests that women’s interest in Frances Cleveland could cross racial as well as class lines.65 Frances Cleveland may have said that she was not interested in politics, but her very presence and high level of visibility gave women a reason to believe that she might be able to speak for

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64 Colonel W. H. Crook, Memories of the White House: The Home Life of Our Presidents from Lincoln to Roosevelt (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), 195-96. William Henry Crook was a Washington policeman assigned to guard the White House; Lincoln named him Executive Clerk in 1865, a position he held for over 40 years. Some authors, such as Carl Sferazza Anthony in First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents’ Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961 (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), have implied that these Saturday afternoon receptions were instituted by Frances Cleveland expressly for working women. In fact, they were a regular part of the White House social calendar well before she became first lady, though, as Crook’s story indicates, it is quite possible that Frances Cleveland was the first White House hostess to actively encourage the attendance of working women.

65 “Louise to Clara,” Washington Bee, 12 June 1886: 2. The Bee also printed a poem celebrating Frances Cleveland as the “fair queen of the nation” and asking her to “Guide thy husband’s hand, / A race still bleeds and asks salvation.” Frances Cleveland supported the Washington Home for Friendless Colored Girls and was a member of the Colored Christmas Club, which provided food and gifts for local children. Anthony, First Ladies, 260.
their interests. They could see her, read about her, and write to her with the knowledge that she would understand their concerns. Women who were constantly being told that their own public influence should be exercised through the domestic realm perhaps saw Frances Cleveland as someone like themselves, but someone who had access to the highest level of politics. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, anyone who was familiar with how Washington worked knew that politicians' wives were able to exert influence in the realm of government through their acknowledged position as leaders of the social world.
CHAPTER II

"SOCIETY IS THE HANDMAIDEN OF POLITICS":

WOMEN AND SOCIAL RITUALS IN LATE-NINETEENTH CENTURY

WASHINGTON, D. C.

Etiquette and guidebooks of the late nineteenth century invariably noted that Washington was unique among American cities for two reasons. First, it was the only city in which there was an "official society," made up of "those actively associated with the various branches and departments of the Government and retired officers of the Army and Navy and families." Admission to society was based not on wealth or family but was acquired through election or appointment to office. Second, official society was hierarchical and governed by rules of precedence. Books devoted a good deal of attention to the question of precedence, and while there was some disagreement over its subtleties, all recognized that the president was the highest ranking man in society, and his wife "is accepted socially as the first lady of the land, and therefore, in society, takes precedence over all others." Social precedence was no small matter, for in Washington, it was said, "social duties...are as imperative as political and governmental duties."

The use of the term duties to describe what women did is significant, suggesting that while women's entertaining was undoubtedly a source of pleasure, it was also an

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obligation and a form of work not unlike men's public and political activities. In fact, society and politics were so closely intertwined as to sometimes be indistinguishable. The public and private realms, the worlds of men and women, blended together in Washington as they did nowhere else in the United States. Political positions determined the social roles women would play, and it was just as readily acknowledged that women's social activities affected politics. "If one lady fails in courtesy towards another in New York or Philadelphia the consequences are not apt to affect public affairs." But in Washington, "if the wife of a member of the Cabinet neglects to pay the calls required of her, her husband may be asked to resign his position." When newspaper and magazine articles referred to Frances Cleveland as "mistress of the White House" or "the first lady of the land," they were not merely indulging in pretty phrases, but were identifying her with a specific social role and status.

The prominent position of politicians' wives in Washington during the last quarter of the nineteenth century was an effect of larger changes that took place in the city during and after the Civil War. Before the war, most politicians did not live in Washington throughout the year, and they did not always bother with the trouble and expense of bringing their wives and families with them while they were in residence. High society was run by a Southern elite, families who had resided in Washington more or less since its founding. However, most of these elite white Southerners left the city during the Civil War, and few returned afterward. A new political class replaced them, many of whom were Northern Republicans who came to work in the new offices and agencies created during the war. The postwar expansion of the federal government and bureaucracy vastly increased Washington's population; as the city grew and became more appealing, officials became more and more likely to live there for longer periods, to rent or buy houses, and to bring their wives, daughters, and other female relatives to live with them.

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Throughout the 1860s and 70s, the *Congressional Directory* developed an increasingly complex system of symbols to indicate how many women accompanied each congressman to Washington, whether they were wives, daughters, or "other ladies," and if they were married or single. The influx of women "doubled the size of official society," and, more importantly, added to it "precisely those individuals with the leisure, the inclination, and the training to pursue and perpetuate its intricate rituals and protocol."\(^70\)

Most middle- and upper-class women were educated to some degree in "social usages," and were prepared to take up a position in official society when their husbands or fathers were elected or appointed to office. For elite women, marriage and society was the only path they were expected to pursue, and one they were trained to undertake; they grew up with society’s rituals and accepted its rules as necessary. Women who did not have the advantage of experience, or those who found Washington’s strict protocol unfamiliar and confusing, could turn to any number or books on the subject, for the most part written by and directed at women. According to Kathryn Jacob, women “took official society’s stern rules of precedence and protocol very seriously” because “their husbands, brothers, and fathers had an identity outside the drawing room that these ladies lacked....Wives of officials were always referred to in terms of their husband’s position...and their place on the ladder of precedence was determined by their husbands’ ranks.”\(^71\) Women had a stake in following and enforcing the rules of precedence, which determined everything from who made the first social call to where one sat at the dinner table; social success was necessary to maintain husbands’ positions and thereby preserve—or enhance—their own place in the social hierarchy.

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\(^71\) Jacob, *Capital Elites*, 73-74.
Official society's social calendar was structured around visiting days and a series of receptions that began on New Year’s day and continued until the beginning of Lent. These afternoon receptions were “arranged among the ladies of the families of the President, Cabinet Ministers, and Governor of the District.” Receptions at the White House fell into several categories. There were receptions of ceremony, held in honor of sovereigns, heads of state, and members of royal families. Public receptions or levees took place at night and were “open to all officials and the people at large.” The first lady held drawing rooms, “particularly intended for ladies,” on Saturday afternoons. At state receptions, “the President receives the officers of the Government, the members of the Diplomatic Corps, and the public, at stated hours.”

The schedule for the winter of 1889 provides us with a good example of Frances Cleveland’s social activities. The social season began on January first with the New Year’s state reception. “The New Year’s entertainment,” wrote Mary Logan, “is the most characteristically American of the season. Every grade of society is represented, and the same hand that stretches out to welcome the courtly low-bowing Ambassador shakes the hands of the humble, sometimes uncouth, laboring man.” Like other such events in Washington, the reception followed rules of precedence, and “the order of receiving the various grades of officials and civic organizations is announced in the daily newspapers.” The public began to assemble at the west entrance of the White House at ten o’clock in the morning, while the cabinet officers and diplomatic corps entered through the south entrance and gathered in the Red Room. At eleven o’clock, the president and first lady, vice president and his wife, and the cabinet ministers proceeded to the Blue Room, where they received, in order of precedence, the diplomatic corps, the

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74 Logan, *Thirty Years in Washington*, 156.
Supreme Court justices, Senators, Representatives, officials of the District, former Cabinet members and Ministers, and officers of the Army and Navy. Finally, at 12:35, the public, who had “patiently waited, whiling away the time with jest and talk,” was admitted. By two o’clock, “the President and Mrs. Cleveland were pretty well tired out by the incessant handshaking, and the public looked, admired, and commented to their hearts’ content, the order was given to close the great doors.”

This was but the first in a series of social events that Frances Cleveland participated in over the next two months. The next day, accompanied by Cleveland’s nieces, she spent the day calling on Cabinet ladies. Though calling was a key part of Washington’s social ritual, the first lady was excused, in recognition of her exalted status, from making formal calls. All women in official society, and indeed “every American, as well as every foreigner, of distinction visiting Washington, must pay the mark of respect of a first call” upon the first lady, but she was not obligated to return calls. However, as the Clevelands were leaving the White House in March, she evidently felt free to “set aside the established order of things and permit herself to enjoy the pleasure of social intercourse with her Washington friends, from which she has been in a great measure debarred during the past two seasons.” This “innovation was the subject of much pleasurable excitement in the social world.”

The following week, Frances Cleveland held her first afternoon reception of the season. “The beautiful weather attracted an immense throng...the crowd seemed rather to increase than diminish as the afternoon advanced.” It was estimated that nine thousand people attended, more than had come to the New Year’s reception. On February 9, an

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even larger crowd attended. "It was impossible for all who desired to gain admittance to
do so. This was due to the fact that a large number of persons, after having once been
presented, instead of passing on into the East Room and leaving the White House,
managed to engineer their way back again into line and pass through a second and in
some cases a third time."\textsuperscript{80} No doubt the huge crowds were increased by the knowledge
that these receptions were the public’s last chance to meet Frances Cleveland.

The last public reception was held on February 16, and about three thousand
people attended.\textsuperscript{81} This final reception originally had been scheduled for February 23,
but Frances Cleveland’s schedule was so crowded with events that she would have had to
give two receptions in three days if the original plan had been followed. In addition to
the fortnightly afternoon public receptions, she was also responsible for acting as hostess
at state dinners and the evening receptions held on alternate Thursdays of each week.
Evening receptions, which were by invitation, might have an attendance of one or two
thousand, while public receptions averaged five to six thousand guests. Frances
Cleveland greeted and shook hands with each guest, and afterwards she “suffers not only
in the right arm from the vigorous and continued handshaking, but is similarly afflicted in
the left arm to such a degree that the pain is sometimes excruciating, and can be relieved
only by the massage treatment.”\textsuperscript{82} Though she always gave every appearance of enjoying
the receptions, giving each caller a “warm grasp” and “cordial smile,” the end of the
social season must have come as something of a relief.\textsuperscript{83} Frances Cleveland’s last
reception in Washington, held on the afternoon of February 26, “was at once a cherished
and melancholy occasion to the friends, mostly ladies, who called to pay their respects to

\textsuperscript{83} Carpenter, “Ladies of the American Court,” 322.
the hostess, who has so endeared herself to the whole country... Some of the ladies present... were moved to tears at parting with the President’s beautiful young wife, who has contributed so largely to the social success of the present Administration.”

One thing that should be immediately evident in reading these accounts of Frances Cleveland’s social activities is the sheer number of people she came into contact with. During the season, she met thousands of people every week, far more than the president did. Cleveland was obligated to attend only state receptions and dinners, gatherings with relatively small and select attendance. When he appeared during the last fifteen minutes of Frances’s first Saturday reception in 1887, it was remarked upon as an unusual incident, for it had been “many years since a President was seen at a Saturday afternoon reception.” For many people, Frances Cleveland was the face of the administration, and one who was remarkably accessible to the ordinary citizen. There were her public receptions, and anyone who wished to be invited to card receptions needed only to call at the White House and leave her card to be put on the list of potential invitees. A visitor to Washington who hoped to meet the first lady was instructed to “apply to the wife of a Senator from her State to arrange such a visit.” Newspaper accounts make clear that the majority of visitors at the first lady’s afternoon receptions were women. For example, at the first Saturday levee, there were “about 20 women with their bunchy dresses and vaulting ambition to for a second look at Mrs. Cleveland, to one man in the crowd.”

As in all cities, the social life of Washington’s elite centered on the rituals of calling. Making social calls was perhaps the most important responsibility of women,

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86 Thomas, Official, Diplomatic, and Social Etiquette, 26-27.
87 Hall, Social Usages, 22.
because it was calling that held the web of society together. By calling, women maintained connections with those they wanted or needed as acquaintances; conversely, if a woman wished to sever social relations with someone, she did so by removing that person from her visiting list. In the opinion of Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, daughter of a Congressman and the author of a book on Washington etiquette, the duties associated with calling were so extensive that "no one woman can possibly have health, strength, and endurance to enable her to meet the heavy burden imposed." She declared, "If ever a woman's parliament ought to be convened, it would be to relieve our social life in Washington from the senseless waste of time involved in the tread-mill routine of social visits."89

Calling may have been a burden on women, but it was not entirely useless. Through calling, women maintained a network of social interaction in a city whose population was constantly changing according to the vagaries of politics. The rituals of calling helped provide a sense of stability and integrated new members of official society into Washington life; in an urban environment that could have quickly become impersonal, the kinds of personal attention that Frances Cleveland was praised for took on a new importance. And, as Catherine Allgor has argued, women had, since the early nineteenth century, been depended upon to maintain the kind of face-to-face interactions that were necessary to a democratic government. By the 1880s, though concerns about corruption and backroom dealings continued to surface, people no longer worried that networks of patronage and personal relations would be detrimental to republican ideals to the extent that politicians could not participate in them at all. Nonetheless, in the late nineteenth century, as in the early republic, "the traditional political tasks of patronage, networking, and material display" were still the responsibility of female members of

political families. Calling and receptions were arenas in which women could achieve political goals and wield power while maintaining a “veil of respectability.”

The possibilities of enhancing a personal network of acquaintances (and thereby increasing political influence), as well as decreasing the burdens of hospitality for the hostess, were provided by the custom of forming a receiving party. Hostesses selected a group of friends and associates to assist her in greeting guests. It was considered a great honor to be asked to receive, particularly at a White House reception. The first lady was “at liberty to ask whom she pleases” to assist at her Saturday afternoon receptions, though it was “customary to have the young ladies of the Cabinet form the reception party at one of the Saturday afternoon receptions to the public.” On other occasions, the first lady was expected to ask “the wives of prominent officials and of officers of the Army and Navy.” Depending upon the occasion and the number of guests, the size of the receiving party could be very large indeed. At one “reception to ladies” to which several thousand women were invited, Frances Cleveland was assisted by fifty young women, “all intimate acquaintances.” An invitation to help receive could be issued as an acknowledgment of a prominent woman or distinguished guest. Receiving parties also helped to introduce young women to the duties of official society. At her first New Year’s reception in 1887, Frances Cleveland was assisted by Mrs. Manning, Mrs. Endicott, Anna Vilas, and Mrs. Lamar, all wives of Cabinet members; their daughters Mary Endicott, Nellie Vilas, Jennie Lamar, and Mary Manning; Mrs. Lamont, the wife of Cleveland’s private secretary, Daniel Lamont; Mrs. Manning’s sister-in-law; Mrs.

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Archibald Hopkins; Helen Fairchild, wife of the assistant secretary of the Navy, and her nieces; and several unmarried women who were guests of Cabinet members.93

Washington's rules of precedence added another layer of complexity to the already intricate etiquette of calling. It was an accepted rule that those of lower status should call first upon people of higher rank. However, though Washington was supposed to have a defined hierarchy, in practice there were some uncertainties about the rankings, especially when men of different branches of the government were involved. These ambiguities manifested themselves in women's calling rituals. For example, "it has long been a question as to whether the wives of the Justices of the Supreme Court have a social precedence over the Senators' wives, and also as to whether the wives of the Senators or those of the Cabinet Ministers should make the first call."94 Experts generally agreed that the Cabinet ladies should call first upon the Senators' wives, but as a compromise, the Cabinet officers took precedence over Senators at social functions.95 Official society thus recognized the importance of the social work done by women. For the wife of a Cabinet member to acknowledge the higher rank of a Senator's wife functioned the same way as the Senator himself recognizing the superior status of the Cabinet member. The two social transactions had equal value in marking and reinforcing the social hierarchy; it did not matter if they were performed by men or by women.

Yet women's social activities did not revolve solely around the maintenance of rank and position. The overlap between politics and society in Washington allowed women to exercise their social authority in ways that were overtly political. One particularly striking example of this interconnection occurred in 1881, when Sir Lionel Sackville-West was appointed British minister to the United States. Sir Lionel was not

94 Carpenter, "Ladies of the American Court," 327.
95 Hall, *Social Usages*, 55.
married, but he had several illegitimate children, and he wanted his oldest daughter to act as his official hostess. Queen Victoria gave her permission, provided that Washington also agreed. The matter was handed to Secretary of State James Blaine, but rather than settle the question himself, he asked his wife to make the decision. Mrs. Blaine formed a “ladies’ committee” which included Mary McElroy, President Arthur’s sister and hostess, and two other prominent women. The committee decided to accept Victoria’s appointment as hostess. In one sense, this was simply a sensible move on Blaine’s part: he surely knew that if he made the decision to accept Victoria himself, the women of official society would have the final authority to welcome or reject Victoria, regardless of the government’s position on the matter. While women ultimately derived what authority they had from their connections with men of official position, the fact that Blaine openly acknowledged their power by asking them to make the decision themselves illustrates the degree to which women had influence over matters that were not strictly confined to the social realm—had the ladies’ committee decided not to accept Victoria, Sir Lionel might very well have declined the appointment.

One observer, noting the symbiotic relationship between society and politics, wondered, “Why are not our women greater politicians?...In America a hostess sure of her soups and her entrees, with such talkers as she could command, could influence American political movements.” This statement could be read as evidence that elite women were not interested in politics, but it also suggests that they expressed their interest in ways that would not identify them as “politicians.” When Frances Cleveland claimed that she had no interest in politics, she likely meant to imply that she was not interested in participating in formal, electoral politics, either as a voter or through the other channels available to middle- and upper-class white women. Nonetheless, Frances

96 Jacob, Capital Elites, 118-19.
Cleveland was hardly divorced from the political issues of her day. As discussed in chapter 1, she was thought of as a supporter of working women. She was an advocate of temperance, although unlike her predecessor Lucy Hayes, she allowed alcohol to be served at White House functions. She was a member of the Ramabai Circle, an organization founded to promote the education of women in India. Though these causes clearly had political implications, they did not necessarily require formal political participation. It was possible for Frances Cleveland to be involved in these causes and still think of herself, or present herself to the public, as someone who was not interested in politics.

Yet the question of the first lady’s political involvement is still more complicated. Not only could her politics be obscured by conventions that defined a limited range of causes and activities as “political,” but they could also be hidden by the gendered language that described women’s activities as exclusively social and men’s as political. Thus Frances Cleveland and other politicians’ wives could also be involved with formal party politics without being considered “politicians.” Frances Cleveland’s political influence, exercised through her social activities, could have passed unremarked upon as such in society columns that recorded who attended receptions and what they wore, but not what topics they discussed. But in Washington, the social was political—or, as one writer on society put it, “Politeness is power.”

Frances Cleveland’s support of the Chace Bill provides one example of the ways in which social activities could be put to political ends. On the evening of March 19, 1888, the president and first lady held a reception for a group of authors who had come to Washington to lobby for the passage of the Chace Bill, an international copyright law. Members of the Cabinet, their wives and daughters, and select guests attended the

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reception, which the *New York Times* called “a graceful tribute to the authors.”

Did the Cleveland’s also invite Congressmen whose influence would be needed to pass the bill? The *Times* article did not list guests by name, and the report in the Washington *Evening Star* mentioned only a few of the forty or so guests, and just one senator, Joseph Hawley, a Republican from Connecticut who had proposed his own copyright bill in 1885.

Cleveland’s invitation to Richard Gilder, editor of *Century* magazine and a leader of the American Copyright League, did not mention who the other guests might be. Mrs. Hearst, wife of California senator George Hearst, had already planned a reception for Saturday night, so Cleveland suggested that the authors visit the White House after the public address that author Edward Eggleston (also a member of the League) would give on Monday evening. Whether influential Congressmen were present or not, the publicity that the reception received—which just happened to be given on the same day that Jonathan Chace, the author of the bill, made his report to the Senate—would have helped the authors’ cause.

While it was Cleveland who discussed the matter with Gilder—probably because they were friends—it is clear from the language of his letter that Frances Cleveland was involved in the decision to invite the authors. As Cleveland wrote, “We should be very glad to see the authors who propose to infest the National Capitol next Saturday within the doors of the White House; and we have given the subject a little attention and thought.” Cleveland’s casual remark, “We hear that Mrs. Hearst proposes a reception,” and the *Evening Star*’s announcement that Mrs. Hawley also would give a tea for the authors, suggests the strong association of social events, even when they had clear

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political implications, with women. Cleveland, Senator Hearst, and Senator Hawley were present at their wives' receptions, and, indeed, may have been the driving force behind them. But once events passed into the realm of society, they became the province of women.102

In her study of Annie Adams Fields, the wife of Boston publisher and editor James T. Fields, and Mary Gladstone, the daughter of British Prime Minister William Gladstone, Susan K. Harris argues that hostesses exerted a unique kind of influence in their "dual sets of public and private activities." Like Fields and Gladstone, Frances Cleveland was someone "about whom 'everybody' knew," but who was "always projected in relation to other people rather than for herself,...rather than as a principal actor on her social stage."103 This is not to say that people were not interested in Frances Cleveland as an individual—because they clearly were—but like most women, the source of her authority and influence came from her ability to interact with people and bring them together socially. As the president's wife, she was the ultimate hostess, with access to people and resources that most women did not have. Therefore she was in a position to exercise great influence, but hers was a power that had to be used carefully and subtly. Cleveland himself was opposed to women's—and especially his wife's—involvement in anything resembling politics.104 The role of hostess was thus perfectly suited to Frances Cleveland's needs and particular situation. It was her duty to act as her husband's hostess, but under the veneer of pure sociability, she "'influenced' by putting other people into contact with each other and so directed the conversation...[H]er power lay

104 If Cleveland truly believed that his wife was not interested in and was not involved in politics, he must have had an extremely narrow definition of politics. In all likelihood, he saw, or chose to interpret, her activities as fulfilling her duties as a wife but having no inherent political meaning.
not in her directions to any particular individual but rather in her ability to bring people
together so that they could enact the agenda that she set.”

The members of the Copyright League evidently appreciated Frances Cleveland’s
support of their cause; after the Chace Bill passed in the Senate, Edward Eggleston
assembled a book of personal autographs of seventy-six authors which he presented to
the first lady in May 1888 to thank her. Eggleston’s own involvement with the
copyright movement—he made frequent lobbying trips to Washington, where he met
with Congressmen, hosted parties, and organized a chapter of the League—illustrates
how both men and women used a variety of tactics, political and social, to promote their
interests. Indeed, it can be difficult to draw distinctions between men and women,
public and private, political and social. In Washington, all elements mingled together and
inevitably affected each other. The Cleveland’s reception for the authors was both an
enjoyable social interaction and an opportunity for the administration to show its support
for the copyright law.

This should serve as a reminder that in looking for evidence of elite women’s
political activity, we should not necessarily expect to find them making speeches or
marching in parades. Nor should we conclude that if we do not find them doing such
things, they were not interested in politics. Pat Jalland’s study of British politicians’
wives provides some useful insights into elite women’s political activity. Elite women
had a complex relationship with public life; in spite of advantages of wealth and
education, it was in some ways more difficult for them to enter the public realm in any
capacity. They received little encouragement to do so, and were more confined by the

105 Ibid., 5-6.
106 Jerome P. Frank, “Mrs. Cleveland’s White House Autographs Preserved,” Publishers Weekly 220 (3
July 1981), 128. The House was too occupied with the tariff bill to give any attention to the Chace Bill and
the session ended before it could be debated. It was finally ratified in 1891. Clark, International
Copyright, 156.
107 William Peirce Randel, Edward Eggleston: Author of The Hoosier School-Master (New York: King’s
dictates of proper ladyhood than working- or middle-class women were. As wives and daughters of politicians, they were often closer to power than most men. Thus it was sometimes more practical and effective for them to exercise their influence through husbands and fathers, rather than as independent political agents.\textsuperscript{108}

Some women saw their political involvement as limited to their role as hostesses. Georgina, the wife of Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, was, according to Jalland, “a formidable woman of decided opinions, deep religious convictions and philosophical interests...But her active involvement as a political wife was restricted to the role of political hostess for her husband’s colleagues. She never made a public speech and disapproved of the new women’s political associations.”\textsuperscript{109} Social duties, were not, of course, purely political work. As Beatrice Webb wrote of her sister Kate Courtney, “Her duty and her pleasure are identical. It is her duty to make herself and her home attractive to her husband’s fellow politicians—and it has always been the greatest pleasure of her life to be on friendly terms with distinguished men and well-bred women.”\textsuperscript{110} However, even when women were more directly involved in formal politics, they often felt compelled to disclaim any real interest or influence and to describe their work in terms of duty or wifely devotion. Elizabeth Harcourt wrote to a friend during her husband’s campaign for member of Parliament in 1888, “If you hear that I am doing dreadful things in the way of canvassing you will know that it is really because I want to sympathise with my boy in his work and not because I am a strong-minded woman!”\textsuperscript{111} Certainly, not all women enjoyed politics and for all of them socializing and canvassing were additional burdens to manage along with the responsibilities of running a large household. But for some women, their claims to disinterest do seem a bit disingenuous. Lady Harcourt, for

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 199.
\textsuperscript{110} Beatrice Potter (Webb) diary, 29 Aug. 1887, quoted in ibid., 195.
\textsuperscript{111} Elizabeth Harcourt to Lord Rosebery, 21 June 1888, quoted in ibid., 206.
example, wrote to her husband, "I only report what I hear and do not express opinions," but then, Jalland notes, proceeded to give an astute analysis of Sir William's political rival Joseph Chamberlain.112

Elite women in Britain who did wish to become more directly involved in politics had new opportunities to do so starting in the 1880s. With the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act, which put limits on campaign expenditures and outlawed paid election canvassers, women were suddenly in demand as unpaid party workers. Doubtless the changes in the law also encouraged men to put more pressure to participate on wives who had previously remained aloof. Women soon began to create their own political organizations, beginning in 1885 with the Women's Council of the Primrose League, a women's auxiliary of the conservative party.113 Jalland argues that auxiliaries were a necessary first step in the politicization of elite women. There they gained experience and confidence, and became "accustomed to playing a political role in their own right in campaigning for male votes." Auxiliaries also aided the suffrage movement, according to Jalland, because they "helped win for the suffrage cause the sympathy of those women with perhaps the least to gain by the vote but the most to contribute in terms of leadership and influence."114

In the United States, as well, elite white women were becoming more involved in political activity. An article in the Woman's Journal that reported on the founding of a "Frances Folsom Cleveland Influence Club" in Washington noted that it aimed to "emulate the efforts of the Primrose League." The article's author, probably Henry

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112 Lady Harcourt to Sir William Harcourt, 9 July 1903, quoted in ibid., 197. Elizabeth Harcourt, it is interesting to note, was American; Chamberlain's wife was the Mary Endicott who helped Frances Cleveland receive at the New Year's reception in 1887. They were just two of many American women married to prominent British politicians. The connections between British and American politics, and the transatlantic influence American women may have had, have not, as far as I am aware, been examined by historians.

113 Jalland, Women, Marriage and Politics, 204-05.

114 Ibid., 209; 220.
Blackwell, took a dim view of this new organization of "fashionable girls, who would probably regard the idea of voting with holy horror," and their plans to "march through the streets adorned with helmets and uniforms" during political processions. While acknowledging that "it is good that women should take an interest in politics," Blackwell believed that there would be "more practical efficiency in women's actually voting than in their being drilled to march through the streets to 'influence' voters." The members of the many Frances Cleveland Clubs that sprang up around the country found themselves in a difficult position. On one side, they were criticized by people like Grover Cleveland himself, who was extremely wary of any club that took women away from the home. On the other hand, they were dismissed by those who, like Blackwell, thought they were not radical enough. However, like the Primrose League, Frances Cleveland Clubs were an important first step in the politicization of women who might otherwise have been reluctant to become involved. Middle- and upper-class white women were already accustomed to playing decorative or symbolic roles in public ceremonies. And it was probably easier for a woman to parade through the streets under the banner of a "Frankie Cleveland Club," with its comforting associations with domestic virtues, than it would have been for her to do the same in the name of women's rights.

Frances Cleveland's effect on politics thus extended beyond her personal sphere of influence to women who were outside Washington's official society, but who were familiar with the first lady through the press. Ellen DuBois has argued that one of the

116 Cleveland refused to give his endorsement to a national organization of Frances Cleveland Influence Clubs, so that, as he wrote, "the name now sacred in the home circle as wife and mother may well be spared in the organization and operation of clubs created to exert political influence." Mrs. Cleveland's Name: Why it Should Not Be Dragged into the Conflict of Politics," New York Times, 10 July 1892: 4; Cleveland, "Woman's Mission and Woman's Clubs," Ladies Home Journal 22 (May 1905), 304-05.
reasons why the nineteenth-century suffrage movement failed to attract a mass base of support was that its proposition of a public, nonfamilial role for women ran counter to the ways most women understood their lives. Women “understood their grievances in the context of the private sphere.” They were “overwhelmingly limited to the private realities of wifehood and motherhood, and they experienced their discontent in the context of those relations.” DuBois uses the success of the WCTU to demonstrate that women did have “the capacity for protest and activism” when it was based in the private sphere. DuBois’s argument may help to explain why Frances Cleveland was such an appealing figure to women: like the WCTU, she “spoke to women in the language of their domestic concerns.” She offered them a model for participating in public life in the familiar guise of wife and mother, so that public activities seemed a natural extension of domestic duties. It was Frances Cleveland’s very conventionality and apparent acceptance of a private, domestic role that allowed her to step outside of those conventions without censure, and for other women to use her as a symbol and a justification of their own public actions.

CONCLUSION

In *Democracy*, Henry Adams’s 1880 novel of American politics, a young widow, Madeleine Lee, feeling that she has exhausted the intellectual, cultural, and charitable possibilities of New York, moves to Washington in order to discover the true nature of American democracy. Madeleine and her sister, Sybil, quickly become popular figures in Washington society, and Madeleine attracts the attention of Silas P. Ratcliffe, a senator from Illinois. Everyone in Washington knows about Ratcliffe’s interest in Madeleine, and they attempt to enlist her help in getting Ratcliffe to promote their interests. Mr. Schneidkoupon, for example, knowing that Ratcliffe may be named Secretary of the Treasury under the new administration, wants to “keep him straight on the currency and the tariff.” But as Ratcliffe “keeps very shy of politics,” Schneidkoupon’s only option to meet with him socially is “to make it a ladies’ dinner.” Madeleine is at first surprised by the suggestion that she attend a “lobby dinner” and wonders if it is proper, but concedes that “it would certainly be amusing.”

Madeleine soon becomes accustomed to the idea of taking on a political role; indeed, she discovers that “to tie a prominent statesman to her train and to lead him about like a tame bear” provides “certain amusement.” Washington society comes to believe that Madeleine is using her influence over Ratcliffe not only on other people’s behalf but to further her own ambitions. “There was a very genuine impression in Washington that Mrs. Lee would like nothing better than to be in the White House.” She is well aware of the gossip, but believes that if she were to accept an offer of marriage from Ratcliffe, she

would only do so out of a desire to save him from corruption. When Ratcliffe does propose to her, he attempts to break down her resistance by appealing to her ambition, saying, “You are...fitted better than any woman I ever saw, for public duties. Your place is there. You belong among those who exercise an influence beyond their time. I only ask you to take the place which is yours.” Madeleine rejects Ratcliffe’s proposal, but she eventually realizes that he is right and that she had not been motivated by self-sacrifice, but by “ambition, thirst for power, restless eagerness to meddle in what did not concern her.”

While Madeleine is appalled to make this discovery about herself, there is nothing shocking to most Washingtonians in the idea that she should pursue her ambitions by encouraging the attentions of Ratcliffe. “That she should accept the first public man of the day, with a flattering chance for the Presidency...was perfectly natural, and in her undertaking she had the sympathy of all well-regulated Washington women who were not possible rivals; for to them the President’s wife is of more consequence than the President.” For Washington women, Madeleine’s supposed desire to increase her social and political influence, and her plan to do so through marriage to a politician, are perfectly legitimate ends and means. They see her as “a candidate for office,” just as if she were running for an elected position.

No one ever suggested publicly that Frances Folsom had married Grover Cleveland to satisfy her own ambitions. Yet there are definite parallels between her and Madeleine Lee. Educated, intelligent, and wealthy, they were in positions of privilege compared to most other women. But their options were nonetheless very limited. What the historian Barbara Caine has written about Beatrice Webb and her sisters might just as easily be applied to Frances Cleveland and women like her from upper- and middle-class

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120 Ibid., 57, 63, 205, 221.
121 Ibid., 64.
white families. “For all the various kinds of change around them, [they] were born into and grew up in a society with a very narrow range of options for women. Girlhood, Society, marriage, child-rearing, was the intended pattern of their lives, and the one which most of them followed. This could be expanded slightly, by periods of philanthropic work for single young women, or by engaging in a range of public activities for married ones. But outside this there was very little.”\(^{122}\) It is no wonder, then, that women who gained access to the center of political circles through their husbands or male relatives made the most of those connections, carving out a role for themselves and even asserting that it was “much nicer...to be the wife of a President than to be Mr. President!”\(^{123}\)

And perhaps, as Adams said, they were “not very far from the truth.”\(^{124}\) Political wives, who knew from experience how corrupt and vicious party politics could be, may very well have felt they were better off eschewing formal political channels and working through social networks instead. Through marriage, they could enjoy “a good share of the power and none of the responsibility” of holding political office.\(^{125}\) Of course, there were limitations to women’s political power. It is unlikely that wives took up positions that were contrary to their husbands’ interests. Women might try privately to persuade them to support causes to which they were indifferent or opposed, but to work publicly against their husbands would have been counterproductive. A woman’s effectiveness in the political sphere depended not only upon her personal abilities as an organizer and hostess but upon her husband’s willingness to allow her the means to entertain and to pursue his own advancement in politics. An 1886 article on the “Cabinet Ladies,” for

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\(^{123}\) Dahlgren, *Etiquette of Social Life*, 54.
\(^{124}\) Adams, *Democracy*, 64.
\(^{125}\) Dahlgren, *Etiquette of Social Life*, 54.
example, noted that "Mrs. Manning’s social ambition was one reason for her husband’s acceptance of a Cabinet post."

Well into the late nineteenth century, political couples continued to think of their roles as being divided by gender, with men doing the work of government while women took care of necessary but time-consuming social duties. Yet it seems that this divide was in many instances nothing but a convenient fiction used to maintain a sense of order and stability. Though we should not overemphasize the extent to which women were able to effect real political change through their social roles, they participated in a world where actions had both political and social meaning, and where it was often difficult to draw the line between the two. For all Grover Cleveland’s insistence that Frances was just a “sensible, domestic American wife,” he could not erase the perception that she, too, was an “official personage.”

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