



Photo by Jim Higgins
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The Blue Mountain Room at the White House

KATHLEEN CURTIS WILSON

Appalachian culture seems to have had a special attraction for at least two first ladies, Eleanor Roosevelt and Ellen Axson Wilson. Mrs. Roosevelt visited the White Top Mountain Folk Festival in southwestern Virginia, in 1933; between 1934 and 1942, the White House hosted nine concerts of traditional music and dance. The Coon Creek Girls from Kentucky and a square dance team from western North Carolina directed by Bascom Lamar Lunsford performed in 1939, with Mrs. Roosevelt, the president, and the king and queen of England in attendance. Also present was Mrs. Wilson, who several decades earlier had introduced Appalachian women's crafts into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. This essay recounts that story. —Editor

As an artist and a Southerner, Ellen Axson Wilson, wife of President Woodrow Wilson, saw firsthand the expert craftsmanship of Appalachian women during her travels to the North Carolina mountains, and she understood their struggle as artists and wage earners. By decorating the White House with handcrafted fabrics, she focused national attention on the lives, financial needs, and talents of mountain women.

In the first quarter of the 20th century, craft programs and industrial schools were established in southern Appalachia by men and women who recognized the need to provide income and education to an underserved people. The Southern Industrial Educational Association (S.I.E.A.), founded by Alabama native Martha Sawyer Gielow, was organized to help fund Appalachian schools that taught industrial and homemaking skills.

In the spring of 1913 the S.I.E.A. organized a display and sale of handmade mountain crafts at the Southern Commercial Congress Exhibit held in Washington, D.C. The event, called an "Exchange," had a dual purpose. Money from the sale of the crafts provided financial assistance to mountain women, and the well-attended exhibit offered

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the S.I.E.A. a chance to publicize its mission and recruit new members in the nation's capital.

As honorary president and vice president of the S.I.E.A., Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Thomas Marshall, wife of the vice president of the United States, visited the craft exhibit frequently. Planning an extensive redecoration of the White House private quarters, Mrs. Wilson decided to use fabrics made by mountain women that were on display at the Exchange in the president's bedroom.

Allie Josephine Mast (1861–1936) of Valle Crucis, North Carolina, wove two rugs for the White House on her grandmother's loom, built in 1820. Mast used natural cotton and dark blue jute for the overshot design called Sun, Moon, and Stars. She wove the rug in strips and stitched them together for the larger rug; a smaller rug was displayed under a writing table next to the fireplace.

Seventy-six-year-old Elmeda McHargue Walker of Flag Pond, Tennessee, wove upholstery fabric in the Double Chariot Wheels pattern with natural cotton and finely spun blue wool. Mrs. Wilson used the fabric to cover three slipper chairs, an armchair, and a chaise longue. It was also made into curtains for two large windows in the rear of the White House. At the family home in Elkin, North Carolina, Elmeda's sister Caroline and sister-in-law Martha spun wool and used indigo dye to color the thread for the yardage.

Mrs. Wilson also chose three baskets and a cream-colored cotton coverlet for the room's Victorian Lincoln bed from the Exchange display. All textiles and baskets for the president's bedroom were purchased with government funds and became the property of the White House. The total cost of the items was \$292.16.

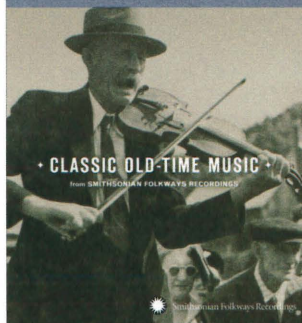
When the room decoration was completed in late autumn 1913, the first lady allowed the S.I.E.A. to have Washington photographer Harris Ewing take pictures of it. Two views of the room, selling for five cents each, were reproduced as souvenir postcards. Referring to the color of the blue dye, the caption on the postcard gave the room its lasting name, "The President's Blue Mountain Room at the White House."

While Ellen Wilson was decorating the president's bedroom with traditional crafts, President Wilson introduced his progressive campaign of national reform and internationalism. The room thus reflects two opposing turn-of-the-century American economic and social movements—the establishment of America as a world industrial power and the beginning of the Arts and Crafts Revival, which renewed interest in handicrafts and created a market for them—epitomizing a point in American history that attempted not only to embrace the past, but also to foreshadow the future. ■

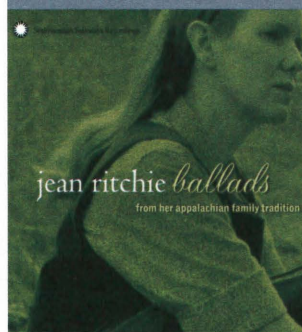
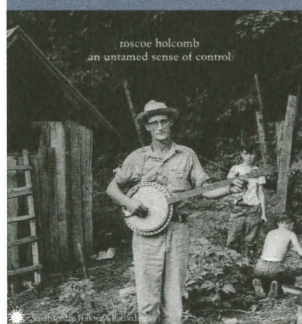
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