

THE FIRST LADY WHO MISSED HER HOMECOMING

The Story of Ellen Axson Wilson's Tragic Return to Rome, Georgia in 1914

In early 1914, the town of Rome, Georgia was on the rise. It had finally shaken off the ashes of the Civil War that had largely decimated the town and its population. Prior to the Civil War, Rome's population, bolstered by a river economy based on cotton trade on Rome's three rivers, was around 16,000 (Floyd Co.), but by 1866, less than 4,000 citizens remained.

Fifty years later, a new era was dawning. Electricity had just arrived in Rome. New manufacturing factories were opening. Newly elected President of the Chamber of Commerce, Wright Willingham, who had recently changed the name of the organization to the Rome Chamber of Commerce from the Merchants & Manufacturers Association, declared the town needed a large celebratory event to mark the progress of the city as a regionally emerging city of culture and commerce.

Willingham declared such a celebration would be held in the fall of 1914 and it would be called "The Homecoming." All Romans, past and present would come together to celebrate the progress of the city. He proposed that \$10,000 (an extravagant sum for the day) would be raised to launch the event. He planned to insure the success of this event by personally inviting former Romans to attend; and First Lady of the United States, Ellen Axson Wilson appeared to be the most famous former Roman of the day.

The invitation issued by Willingham was accepted in a letter received by Willingham in May of 1914. Rome's own First Lady would be the Guest of Honor at "The Homecoming" to be held in October 1914. Her husband and three daughters were also invited; however Mrs. Wilson's letter indicated that she was not sure her only unmarried daughter, Margaret, could attend due to her busy social schedule. The other two daughters had recently married in White House wedding ceremonies and their husbands were setting their agendas, and regrettably President Wilson schedule would not allow him time to visit the city where he first met his bride in May of 1883.

The tragic news was that Ellen Axson Wilson did indeed *come home* in 1914, but not to enjoy parades and streets illuminated in red, white & blue, but in a coffin to be buried beside her parents in Rome's Myrtle Hill Cemetery. She missed "The Homecoming" by three months, as her funeral occurred in Rome on August 11, 1914.



Martha Berry (standing at left) lead a group of girls on a hike from the school to Mrs. Wilson's grave site in November of 1914. Her tombstone had not arrived from Italy yet, but the tombstones of her mother and father can be seen to the left back of this photo. Martha Berry sent this picture to Woodrow Wilson and received a reply from the President dated November 21, 2914. (letter & photo is courtesy of Berry School archives).

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

November 21, 1914

My dear Miss Berry:

Thank you sincerely for your kindness in sending me the pictures of the young ladies who carried the beautiful flowers to Mrs. Wilson's grave. Will you not let me express at the same time my very deep interest in the school and in all that concerns it? Mrs. Wilson had its welfare very much at heart and, therefore, it touches me very deeply that the children of the school should think of her as of a true friend who is gone.

I am glad to find the fame of the school spreading rapidly in this part of the country and hope that as it is better known it will be more and more generously supported.

Cordially and sincerely yours,

Miss Martha Berry,
Berry School,
Mount Berry, Georgia.



President Wilson sent a letter acknowledging the girls' visit to Mrs. Wilson's grave and thanking them.



MRS. WOODROW WILSON'S FUNERAL - ROME, GA. AUGUST 11, 1914



Ellen Axson in 1882
(Coursey of the Woodrow Wilson
House in Washington, D. C.)



Ellen and Woodrow Wilson and
daughters, Nell, Jessie and Marga-
ret at Sea Girth, NJ, shortly after
Wilson had been nominated by the
Democratic Party for President.

(Coursey of the Woodrow Wilson
House in Washington, D. C.)