

**Edith Bolling
Galt Wilson
1872-1961
Whytheville
First Lady**



One of the oldest families in Virginia, the Bollings owned a large plantation near Lynchburg that was lost as a result of the Civil War. The family resettled in Wytheville, where William Holcombe Bolling was a lawyer and circuit court judge while fathering eleven children. Edith, his seventh child and fourth daughter, was born in 1872. Most of her education occurred at home with the exception of a year at the Powell School for Girls in Richmond and a year at Martha Washington College in Abingdon. While visiting a married sister in Washington, Edith fell in love with the nation's capital and her brother-in-law's cousin, Norman Galt. After a four-year courtship and Galt's inheritance of the family jewelry and silver business, they were married in 1896. The business was highly successful, catering to Washington elite, allowing the young Galts annual trips to Europe and a comfortable lifestyle. Tragically, after twelve years of marriage, Galt died suddenly. Edith delegated the responsibility for running the business to trusted employees and spent most of the next few years travelling in Europe. Edith had a close friend, Altrude Gordon, who was engaged to Dr. Cary Grayson, White House physician to President Woodrow Wilson. Grayson was concerned about the president, who had suffered from depression following the death of his wife in 1914. In an effort to raise Wilson's spirits, he introduced the two. Wilson was immediately taken with Edith and they married in 1916, shortly after his election to a second term. Edith was always at Woodrow's side, working with him through the international crises that followed the outbreak of World War I. She reviewed his notes, listened to his ideas and speeches, and followed his peace plans for Europe. She became completely absorbed in wartime activities, ultimately urging Wilson to go to Europe for the Versailles talks. They were the first U.S. President and first lady to travel abroad together. No first lady had been as deeply involved in both domestic and international politics. In 1919, while touring the western United States to garner support for the League of Nations, Wilson collapsed from a stroke, leaving his left side paralyzed. Edith's life changed drastically as she publicly carried on her husband's duties. Convinced that removal from office would kill him, she served as a buffer between him and his cabinet, political advisors, and the public. She worked with his secretary regarding important correspondence, read necessary papers to him and carried out his instructions. Some historians have asserted that Mrs. Wilson ran the country behind the scenes. However, she always denied this and documentary evidence supports her claim. Despite her personal political activism, she opposed the campaign for women's suffrage waged during his term. Wilson retired at the end of his term and they purchased a home in Washington, D.C., where Edith continued to nurse the former president until he passed away in 1924. Edith dedicated the rest of her life to perpetuating her husband's memory and ideals. She supported the establishment of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides grants for researchers and educators, the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, and the publication of his papers. In 1938, she published her autobiography, *My Memoir*, which was highly critical of many of her husband's associates. She remained actively interested in politics, attending Democratic conventions, inaugurations, and White House functions until her death in December 1961.