CONTENTS

Acknowledgments
vii

Introduction
1

CHAPTER 1: “An Aristocrat to the Tips of Her Fingers”
3

CHAPTER 2: The First Year in the White House
25

CHAPTER 3: Charities and Culture
48

CHAPTER 4: Wife and Mother
68

CHAPTER 5: A Woman of Influence
89

CHAPTER 6: After the White House
114

Notes
133

Bibliographic Essay
157

Index
163
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Karen Keel Gould died while this book was being written. She first suggested the idea of the Modern First Ladies series and saw me through the ups and downs of editing such an ambitious undertaking. During more than forty-one years of marriage, she inspired me with her own example as a distinguished scholar in medieval art history and the history of the book, provided wise criticism and loving support, and enriched the world with her thoughtfulness, insight, and courage in the face of overwhelming personal adversity. I hope this study of Edith Roosevelt honors her memory.

Any factual mistakes and errors of interpretation are my sole responsibility.

Lewis L. Gould
Monmouth, Illinois
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Few first ladies have enjoyed a better reputation among historians than Edith Kermit Roosevelt. Favorable adjectives have accompanied most descriptions of her years in the White House from 1901 to 1909. She was a sure-footed mistress of the mansion who never slipped up in executing her duties as hostess and mother. Aristocratic, scholarly, cultured, tasteful, and discreet are words that people at the time and biographers since have applied to her. The consensus is that she was Theodore Roosevelt’s wisest adviser and he rejected her counsel at his own peril. In short, the model of a modern first lady appeared in the opening decade of the twentieth century, and all of Edith Roosevelt’s successors have struggled to reach her level of achievement.

These judgments have endured because they captured important elements in the life and character of Edith Roosevelt. She did bring strict moral values to Washington. She infused the White House with music and literature at a very high level. She did soften the edges of her charismatic husband and gave him the benefit of her intuitions about people and issues. The sense of a salon in the presidential mansion in the Roosevelt years where the fine arts thrived owed a great deal to the nurturing spirit of Edith Roosevelt.

Yet as research for this book proceeded, there were shadings about Edith Roosevelt that complicated the historical picture of her tenure. Often depicted as someone averse to activism, she did more on the
public stage than scholars have understood. Newspaper coverage of her was much more extensive than the clichés about her reticence and silence have conveyed. She acted as a celebrity sponsor at a New York benefit concert, intervened in what became a high-profile custody dispute, and dabbled in political patronage on behalf of a society friend. What she spent each year on clothes, her gifts to charitable causes, and the expenses of her White House operation all became objects of press attention and controversy.

Edith Roosevelt also gets warranted credit for the beginnings of a support structure for presidential wives that continued into the rest of the century. Her reliance on Isabelle “Belle” Hagner as a social secretary started the trend of bureaucratizing the institution of the first lady. To that endeavor, Edith Roosevelt brought the organizing skills she had already shown in the management of the Roosevelt estate at Oyster Bay, New York.

The most noteworthy revelation about Edith Roosevelt, however, occurred in the area of race relations. In letters to her son Kermit and in one post-presidential letter to a family friend, she revealed that she had grave doubts about the capacity of African Americans to live on an equal basis with whites. She deplored what she described as the mixing of the races. Sometimes in her private letters she invoked racial slurs to express her feelings of prejudice. She brought entertainers who sang “coon songs” to the White House on two occasions. The impact of Edith Roosevelt’s racism on her husband has never been explored because it has not been revealed until now. Tracking her bigotry as an element in the racial policies of the Theodore Roosevelt administration raises disturbing questions about the larger historical impact of this important first lady.

The Edith Roosevelt who inhabits the pages of this book is a more complex and interesting figure than the somewhat secularized saint that she has become in the literature on first ladies. Many people who knew her found her inspiring and gracious. Others in her family recalled a more astringent and sometimes nasty personality. This book attempts to sum up her important role as a presidential wife in a manner that does full justice to the many-sided and sometimes flawed human being who was Edith Kermit Roosevelt.
During the summer of 1901, few Americans thought much about the first lady as a national institution. Ida Saxton McKinley was the twentieth woman who had occupied the Executive Mansion as “the first lady of the land.” Wives of the presidents hosted receptions during Washington’s busy social seasons. At some of these events pianists and singers performed in musicales with the artists invited through the good offices of the Steinway Piano Company. An invalid from the effects of strokes and personal trauma, Mrs. McKinley was, in the words of a congressional wife, “a poor suffering woman who ought to have been hidden from the gaze of the curious.” The president protected her from too much public attention, and curiosity about the first lady became a social blunder in the face of William McKinley’s dignified silence.1

If there was little coverage of the first lady, there was even less in the news about the wife of the incoming vice president, Theodore Roosevelt. When Edith Roosevelt’s husband was inaugurated in March 1901, a religious newspaper described her as “an aristocrat to the tips of her fingers.”2 Beyond that generality, it seemed likely that Edith Roosevelt would pass through the four years of the vice presidency in relative quiet. The Roosevelts, with their six children, spent the summer at their home in Oyster Bay on New York’s Long Island. Since Congress would not convene until December and President
McKinley had ruled out a third term, Theodore worked on his potential candidacy for the White House in 1904. Edith meanwhile oversaw her brood and managed the daily operations of the dozen or so staff members at the sprawling family home. As August faded into September, the quiet rhythms of the summer seemed as serene as the nation’s future in the first year of the twentieth century.

Then came the stunning news that President William McKinley had been shot on 6 September. During a visit to the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, New York, an assassin had fired two bullets into the president while he received the public at the Temple of Music. The following week first brought hopeful news that McKinley might recover. That was unlikely. “A stout man of 60 can hardly have his stomach twice perforated and recover.” Nonetheless, the nation and the apprehensive Roosevelt family waited for further news.3

By Friday, 13 September, the president’s condition deteriorated and his death became imminent. Theodore Roosevelt left the remote Adirondack mountain location where his family was vacationing for the long, difficult drive to Buffalo. Edith and the children remained behind to await word of her husband’s elevation to the presidency.

The next morning, 14 September, a confirming telegram arrived. The new first lady began a daylong journey to Oyster Bay. After she reached the Roosevelt residence, she declined all comment to the press and spent the day in seclusion. On the 16th, she and her oldest son, Theodore Jr., went first to Manhattan, crossed the Hudson River on a ferry, and then boarded a special car of the Pennsylvania Railroad to rejoin the new president. As she did so, “the two or three hundred men assembled raised their hats, and Mrs. Roosevelt acknowledged the courtesy with a bow. A crowd of camera fiends, who had gathered in a row on the main platform down which Mrs. Roosevelt would pass,” were shooed away by railroad personnel.4

As the nation reacted to the tragedy and the accession of a young, vital president, the press and public sought information about his wife and family. It took several weeks for stories to appear about “The New Lady of the White House.” Readers learned from her friends of her “perfectly balanced character, her marvelous reserve force, and her calm, cool judgment of people and things.” These columns spoke of her as she was in September 1901 and made only passing reference to her family and origins in the society of New York City.5
Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt knew the aristocracy of the nation’s largest city from the inside, but she was not one of the metropolitan elite herself. During the four decades that had passed since her birth on 6 August 1861, the fortunes of her family had moved from the affluence of her early childhood to the shabby genteel existence of her mother and sister at the end of the nineteenth century. For her, watching pennies and managing expenses was as natural as the same process was a mystery to her open-handed husband.

She was also careful to leave few clues about her family’s past for future generations to examine. The records of the Carow family are sparse. In 1906, she told her son Kermit that “I have been busy destroying old letters these last two days and some of them are very amusing, only one can’t keep everything. Take warning by your mother and destroy most of your letters as soon as you have answered them, before they have time to become an old man of the sea.” Only the dry record of a court case in New York City that Edith and her sister, Emily, filed in the 1880s against an elevated railroad gives a partial sense of the property her family once held in the metropolis.

Her parents were Charles Carow and Gertrude Tyler Carow, and she was the older of their two daughters. Her sister, Emily, never married and spent most of her adult life as an expatriate in Italy. Initially prosperous in his family’s shipping business, Charles Carow lacked good business sense and had a taste for alcohol that grew stronger as the years passed. Edith’s mother devoted little time to her two children as the family troubles mounted. As a result, Edith spent much time alone in the physical surroundings of Victorian Manhattan. She remembered at the end of her life “the cool rooms with high ceilings, matted floors & furnishings covered with shining gay flowered chintz that was in New York.”

She was a bright young girl with a love for English literature and a taste for writing poetry. Edith mastered the essence of the subjects but confessed years later to one of her children that she could “appreciate how hard it is to be accurate for it was my great difficulty at school. I knew dozens of things but ‘the names of battles, dates of kings’ my mind let slip with marked success.”

With a troubled home life, young Edith drew emotional support from her ties with the prosperous and energetic family of Theodore
Roosevelt, Sr. She was very close to Corinne, the second daughter, who was also born in 1861. They formed an affectionate relationship in which poems and confidences were exchanged. With other girls, they created the P.O.R.E. (Party of Renowned Eligibles), which wrote poetry and talked about literary issues. Edith became a surrogate member of the clan who played with the Roosevelt children, went on their outings, and drew inspiration from their energy and high spirits. She connected with the oldest child, Theodore, Jr., who shared her love of reading and literature. An emotional bond was forged and many near to the Roosevelts expected the relationship between young Theodore and Edith to turn into romance when they grew up.

By the late 1870s, Theodore was preparing to head off to Harvard and his ties with Edith intensified. What happened next is still shrouded in some mystery since the principals commented only in a guarded manner about these events. In the summer of 1878 at the Roosevelt family home in Oyster Bay, New York, Edith and Theodore quarreled and their intimate connection frayed. Almost a decade later, Theodore noted that “we both of us had, and I suppose have, tempers that were far from being the best.” He returned to Harvard in the fall and fell in love with Alice Lee, who would become his first wife.¹¹

Years later, Edith asserted that Theodore had proposed to her first and she had turned him down, as was the custom in that time and place for an initial offer of marriage. Roosevelt family tradition had it that Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., disapproved of the proposed union because of Charles Carow’s alcoholism. On Edith’s side, there was talk that the Roosevelt family had a history of scrofula (tuberculosis of the lymph nodes), which worried the Carows. No evidence of this malady has been found in the Roosevelt history. Whether Edith remembered an actual proposal or claimed there had been one to ease the pain of Theodore’s engagement and subsequent marriage to Alice cannot now be decided.

Theodore Roosevelt announced his engagement to Alice Lee of Boston in February 1880. No contemporary evidence of Edith Carow’s reaction survived and there are conflicting recollections of her response to the news. That it came as an emotional shock to her seems probable. She attended the wedding of Theodore and Alice Lee on 27 October 1880 and “danced the soles off her shoes” at the reception that followed.¹²
During the five years that ensued, Edith Carow read of Theodore’s burgeoning career as a member of the New York Assembly and his bright future in state and national politics. She lost her own father to the effects of alcoholism in March 1883. The impact of her father’s death brought her into the court system. She and her sister had earlier inherited from an uncle, Robert Kermit, an interest in a New York building on Stone Street. In September 1886, they sued the New York Elevated Railroad Company and the Manhattan Railway Company, the two elevated railroads in the city, for damages to the warehouse structure arising from the construction of the lines. The lower court found for the two women, but the railroads appealed on grounds that an expert witness had erred in setting the value of dam-

*Alice Lee Roosevelt. Edith Roosevelt told her children that Alice Lee Roosevelt, Theodore’s first wife, would have bored their father had she lived. Library of Congress*
ages. An appeals court affirmed the judgment for Edith and Emily in 1890.\(^\text{13}\)

In February 1884, Edith read of the tragedy that had befallen Theodore Roosevelt. Alice Lee Roosevelt died giving birth to a daughter, Alice, and his mother succumbed to typhoid fever the same day.\(^\text{14}\) The grief-stricken Roosevelt put his infant into his sister’s hands and plunged into Republican politics during the presidential election of 1884. He also sought solace on his ranch in the Dakotas where he had invested a substantial portion of his inheritance. Only to a few friends did he unburden himself about the shock of his wife’s death. Otherwise, he kept silent regarding his own grief and sense of despair.

In Victorian America, members of the upper classes married only once and for life. If a spouse died, the survivor went on alone to preserve the memory of the departed. It was a stern code that the twenty-six-year-old Theodore, virile and energetic, intended to carry out. To that end, he avoided any contact with Edith Carow and instructed his two sisters not to make any meeting possible. Such a rigid proscription could not last in the small social world that both young people inhabited.

In September 1885, Theodore and Edith met by accident at the home of his sister, Anna Roosevelt. The physical and emotional attraction that had pulsed through their young lives flared again. Theodore had been celibate since his wife’s death while Edith had matured into an attractive twenty-four-year-old woman. With her feathered hat and long gloves, the slender, comely Edith must have struck Theodore, in what became his favorite word to describe her, as “cunning” in the sense of cute rather than clever. They began seeing each other at Edith’s residence and in public, though they were careful not to reveal to friends or family their growing attraction for each other. By November 1885 Theodore had proposed and Edith had accepted him. For the moment they resolved to keep their engagement secret given the short time that had elapsed since the death of Alice Roosevelt. Their intention was to marry in late 1886.

The year that followed was difficult for the couple, but especially for Theodore, whose passion for Edith intensified. Years later, writing her from Africa, he asked her: “Do you remember when you were such a pretty engaged girl and said to your lover ‘no Theodore, that I cannot allow?’” As a respectable woman, she maintained the proper
sexual boundaries until their wedding day. In 1886, Edith’s mother and sister decided to live in Europe where they could maintain a decent existence with the modest estate that remained after Charles Carow’s death. The three Carows departed for England in the spring of 1886. For the next eight months, Edith and Theodore exchanged letters about their romance and future life together. Edith later destroyed most of these documents, but she kept one letter dated 8 June 1886 in which she told him, “Now I do care about being pretty for you” and that she loved Theodore “with all the passion of a girl who has never loved before.”

Theodore had not informed his two sisters of his engagement and was chagrined when the New York Times broke the news of the proposed marriage in late August. His sisters insisted on a retraction, which appeared the following week. Theodore knew that the item was true and he had to write his sisters to inform them of what he had kept secret from them for almost ten months. In the letter to Anna, Roosevelt waffled about his deceit and urged his sister not to blame Edith. He also told her that “if you wish to you shall keep Baby Lee, I of course paying the expense.” Theodore offered these assurances without consulting Edith and thus laid the basis for future tension with his sister and also his young daughter.

Before he departed for England to marry Edith, Theodore made a race for mayor of New York during October 1886 as the candidate of the Republicans. He was defeated, as had been expected, and he seems to have given little thought about what would have happened had he won. A honeymoon with Edith, for example, would have been impossible had he been required to assume the mayoralty in early 1887. Then and later Theodore put his career ahead of his personal life, as Edith Carow would soon learn.

Roosevelt and his sister Anna arrived in London in November 1886 and the wedding to Edith Carow took place on 2 December. The best man was Cecil Spring Rice, a British diplomat whom Theodore had met on the boat over from New York. The newlyweds honeymooned across Europe for three months and then returned to the United States in late March 1887. The passionate bond that they established during their travels became the basis of Edith’s place in her husband’s emotional life. Important decisions about family life awaited them. Edith was already pregnant with their first child, and
the future of three-year-old Alice Lee Roosevelt also hinged on decisions the couple would make.

From the outset of her marriage, Edith realized that her husband did not share her concern about family finances. Theodore’s cattle ventures in the Dakotas had lost a substantial part of his inheritance. Moreover, he wanted to live in the large house he had built for his first wife at Oyster Bay, New York, a structure he had dubbed Lee-
holm. Edith accepted the new residence, but its name became Sag-amore Hill. Theodore’s affluent lifestyle required a dozen or so servants to manage the estate, the stables, and the grounds. Edith would soon master the complex art of running the new establishment. A member of the staff recalled for an interviewer that if Roosevelt encountered men working in the garden during the summertime, Theodore “would stop and talk to one of the men. Edith would come along, stop and say, ‘Run along, Theodore. I’ll take care of it.’ Mrs. Roosevelt ran the estate. He had nothing to do with operating the estate. It was entirely her.”

Within the family, Edith lost no time in asserting her own authority. She and Theodore had enjoyed a passionate and idyllic honeymoon that had underscored their sexual compatibility. While she was too much the moralist to capitalize in an open way on her erotic hold on her husband, she also knew that she no longer had to defer to either of Theodore’s two sisters. Whatever slights she might have suffered when she was a hanger-on in the Roosevelt clan, she now knew she could select the terms on which her in-laws came and went at Sag-amore Hill. Years later her stepdaughter recalled this process. “She had a tendency to say things like, ‘Theodore, I think we’ve seen quite enough of Corinne and Douglas [Robinson, Corinne’s husband] and I don’t think we’ll ask them down for a while.’ And that was that.”

When it came to Baby Alice, Edith made it clear that she and Theodore would raise the child as part of their own growing family. She insisted that her stepdaughter call her “Mother.” On the other hand, Edith and Theodore, each for their own reasons, did not want to use Alice’s name within the household. Once Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., had been born in September 1887, a solution presented itself. Alice would be known as “Sister” from then on. The two parents never had to invoke the name of the deceased wife. That facilitated Edith’s purpose to first blur and then almost expunge the memory of her dead rival for the affection of her husband. She told the children that Theodore had proposed to her first and, more important, that Alice Lee Roosevelt would have bored Theodore as the years went on. It was the initial illustration of the inner toughness that Edith Roosevelt brought to her marriage and later to her time as first lady.

While the arrangement suited Edith’s emotional needs, it imposed serious psychological burdens on her stepdaughter. Alice Lee Roo-
sevelt never felt a part of the growing family of her half-brothers and half-sister. She identified more with her aunt, Anna Roosevelt, who later stated that she never overcame the loss of Baby Alice when Theodore and Edith claimed her as their own. “My stepmother made an enormous effort with me as a child,” Alice said decades later, “but I think she was bored by doing so.” Alice’s last verdict on Edith was chilling. “In many ways she was a very hard woman.” The difficult interaction of these two contrasting personalities continued on through the years in the White House.  

During the first decade of her marriage, Edith Roosevelt had five children and two miscarriages. There were four boys, Theodore, Jr. (1887), Kermit (1889), Archibald (1894), and Quentin (1897). Ethel (1891) was the only daughter of Theodore and Edith. Edith learned that her husband preferred not to be around during her pregnancies. Like so much else in their union, he left the household decisions to her—the running of Sagamore Hill, the constant struggle to pay the bills of their expensive lifestyle, and the day-to-day management of their energetic covey of children. Her sacrifice allowed Theodore to pursue the political career that dominated his approach to life.

In the spring of 1889, President Benjamin Harrison appointed Theodore to the Civil Service Commission as a reward for his campaigning for the national ticket in the 1888 election. Edith had accompanied her husband on the hustings and the couple had “immense fun on our campaigning tour in the West.” Pregnant with another child, Edith elected to stay at Sagamore Hill until Kermit Roosevelt was born on October 10, 1889. The Roosevelts were reunited in Washington at year’s end.

For Edith Roosevelt the four and a half years that followed became a memorable period in her life. The Roosevelts were welcomed into Washington society and made friendships that endured for the rest of Theodore’s political career. The reclusive historian and social critic Henry Adams took Edith into his inner circle. She also bonded with Anna Cabot Lodge, the wife of Theodore’s closest friend, Massachusetts representative and after 1893 U.S. senator, Henry Cabot Lodge. Speaker of the House Thomas B. Reed was another compatriot of both Edith and Theodore. In 1891, Theodore began a friendship with the new solicitor general, William Howard Taft of Ohio. At some point Edith met Helen Herron Taft, the ambitious wife of
Will Taft, but the two women did not hit it off. “I don’t like Mrs. Roosevelt at all,” Helen Taft told her son Charles some years later, “I never did.”

Among the names that pass through Theodore Roosevelt’s letters in these years were Senator and Mrs. Edward O. Wolcott of Colorado. This friendship, unknown to previous writers on the Roosevelts, would have political consequences for the presidency of Theodore and the years when Edith was first lady. Edward Oliver Wolcott (1848–1905) was a Denver attorney who had been elected to the Sen-
ate in 1888. A gifted orator who became an insider in the upper house during his first term, Wolcott had the money to pursue a lavish lifestyle and to feed a gambling habit that amounted to a compulsion. Like other western Republicans during the administration of Benjamin Harrison, the young senator championed the cause of “free silver” since his state produced so much of the white metal. His sponsorship of monetary inflation did not at this time put him at odds with eastern Republicans. He became an intimate friend of Henry Cabot Lodge and was much in demand as a platform orator.

A very eligible bachelor, Senator Wolcott married Frances Metcalfe Bass in the spring of 1890. She was the widow of former House member Lyman Bass of New York and was three years younger than her new husband. Frances Wolcott knew many of the greats and near-greats of Washington, and her second marriage added to her social standing at first. After a ceremony that was “made as brilliant as possible,” the senator and his bride departed from Buffalo, New York, for New York City “in a special car that was profusely adorned with flowers and foliage plants.” Both Wolcotts had ample personal funds and they soon established a salon in Washington where lavish entertaining occurred.

The new Mrs. Wolcott was a patron of the arts and letters, and Edith and Theodore Roosevelt were frequent guests during the next four years. No letters between the two women from this period have survived, but from the evidence in subsequent documents in the Theodore Roosevelt Papers, they seem to have been on a first-name basis. Alice Roosevelt Longworth remembered that Frances Wolcott “collared lots of Interesting People and had current events sessions for people who were Going Somewhere.” By 1894, Theodore reported to his sister that “we are on terms of informal intimacy” in several houses in Washington including “the Wolcotts.”

Edith Roosevelt and Frances Wolcott had a natural affinity in their love of literature and their desire for self-improvement. The sessions where Mrs. Wolcott’s guests read papers on art and commented on novels were just the kind of activity that Edith Roosevelt most admired. The genteel social life that Frances Wolcott represented accorded with Edith Roosevelt’s own values. They were, as newspapers later reported, both members of “the most exclusive social set in Washington.”
It is not clear when the Wolcott marriage first encountered problems. There was a clash of personal attitudes from the outset. Frances Wolcott, said one account of the marriage, preferred “tea and crumpets” while her husband’s taste ran to “rum and strumpets.” In her memoirs, Frances observed of her Edward that he had “boundless energy” and “always got what he wanted when he wanted it.” During their courtship, he had sent her “the tiniest of toy pug dogs, sweet-smelling and affectionate.” When he went to his guest room on a visit to the home of Frances Bass, “he found ‘Posy,’ the pug, had deposited a litter of puglets in the center of his blue satin eider-down coverlet. No doubt she was political minded and thus presaged a wish for rich fertility in his future career.”

Once he was married, Ed Wolcott continued his raffish ways. He bet large sums of money, sometimes as much as $12,000 on the turn of a card. Rumor had it that he also patronized brothels, including the infamous Navarre establishment in Denver. The senator became known as “Edward of Navarre.” During the four years that the Roosevelts and the Wolcotts overlapped in Washington, however, the public facade of a happy marriage for the senatorial couple stayed in place. The Roosevelts did not seem to have looked beneath the surface of the Wolcott union.

The Civil Service Commission years in Washington were happy ones for Edith Roosevelt. In 1899, she told Cecil Spring Rice, “I cannot describe the feeling with which I look back to those years in Washington when we were all young. It is one thing to look young, and another, quite another to be young.” After five years in his post, Theodore was ready to change his political fortunes in 1894. Amid the depression of the 1890s, the Cleveland administration and the Democrats faced a tide of popular protest from both the agrarian People’s Party and the resurgent Republicans. As the congressional and local elections drew near in that year a sweep for the Grand Old Party seemed inevitable in the Northeast.

In New York City, the Republicans saw a chance to oust the Democratic machine of Tammany Hall with Theodore Roosevelt at the head of their mayoral ticket. Public outrage at revelations of Democratic corruption at City Hall made a Republican victory almost assured. Leading party members asked Theodore to consider letting his name go forward. The nomination may not have been as assured as
he later remembered it, but all the signs were favorable for a potential candidacy. When he consulted Edith, however, she advised him against plunging into politics. The family finances were shaky in the depression that gripped the nation. Moreover, Theodore’s brother, Elliott, had died on 14 August after years of alcoholism and drug dependence. Edith had just given birth to Archibald Roosevelt on 9 April and she would have to relocate the family from Washington, which she loved, to New York City, with all its unhappy memories. So Theodore, in deference to his wife’s wishes, said no to the politicians who asked him to run.29

To his sister Anna he made clear his disappointment with Edith’s recommendation and reluctance to advance his electoral career. She spoke to Edith about Theodore’s unhappy mood. Edith was contrite and apologetic. “I never realized for a minute how he felt over this, or that the mayoralty stood for so much to him, and I did not know it either just in what way the nomination was offered; in fact I do not know now for I did not like to ask too much.”30

From this episode she drew the conclusion that she should keep silent about her political judgments in the future. In fact her intuitive sense about the political feeler had merit. New York was a Democratic city where Tammany Hall dominated. Had Theodore Roosevelt won the nomination of the anti-Tammany forces and the election, he would have had three years of public controversy before a likely re-election loss in 1897. It may have seemed to him “a golden chance” missed at the time, but as events proved, his destiny lay in other directions.31

After the Republicans prevailed and Mayor William L. Strong was elected in November 1894, Theodore became a member of the New York City police commission during the spring of 1895. He resigned from the Civil Service Commission on 25 April. Two days later Edith learned that her mother, Gertrude Carow, had died in Turin, Italy. Gertrude was buried in Italy, and Emily came to the United States to join Edith in an extended period of mourning. Through this difficult personal period, Edith adjusted to the expenses of life in the New York area while Theodore’s notoriety as head of the police commission built his national reputation.

With William McKinley and the Republicans favored to win the presidential election of 1896, Theodore plunged into campaigning for
the GOP ticket in the fall. McKinley’s defeat of William Jennings Bryan meant that Republican patronage positions would be open in Washington after 4 March 1897. Through the efforts of friends such as Henry Cabot Lodge and William Howard Taft, Theodore was named assistant secretary of the navy in April. A month later Edith told her sister that she was pregnant, with the baby due in December 1897.

Eager for war with Spain over Cuba, Theodore immersed himself in the details of the navy while Edith arranged their rented house in Washington. Her fourth son, Quentin, was born on 9 November 1897. At first, it seemed as though she would bounce back from childbirth in short order, but her health worsened as 1898 began. In addition to fever and pain, Edith had an abscess on the psoas muscle that required surgery. It was a dangerous procedure and her post-operative condition was poor throughout the month of March 1898. She was mending as the spring progressed, but still weak.

As these private events unfolded for Edith, war with Spain drew nearer. By the end of April the two nations were at war over the fate of the island of Cuba, still a possession of Spain. President William McKinley called for volunteers to conduct the American war effort. Theodore now had his chance to redeem his father’s conduct during the Civil War when the elder Roosevelt hired a substitute to fight for him. Theodore could prove his manhood, build a political future, and burnish his reputation as a public figure. He turned aside McKinley’s pleas that he stay at his post at the Navy Department and prepared to raise a regiment to join the army moving to attack Cuba.

But what about Edith? She had not yet regained her full strength, had a new baby to deal with, and feared that Theodore might be killed. Remembering her decision in 1894, she did not attempt to dissuade him as he prepared for his military adventure. Since his exploits in Cuba proved to be his path to the presidency, second-guessing Theodore’s decision would be a moot exercise. Yet, there was something very selfish and irresponsible in his actions, which might have left his children without a father and Edith without a husband. There is not much evidence that Theodore weighed the alternatives with any sense of the reasonable considerations on the side of staying at his present post and serving the nation in the Navy Department. He convinced himself that his country needed him on the battlefield and he
later insisted “that I would have turned from my wife’s deathbed to have answered that call.” A man of destiny, Theodore Roosevelt rarely took the feelings of others into account when deciding what he wanted to do. Edith supported his decision and Theodore responded, “I can never say what a help and comfort Edith has been to me.”

The Roosevelts were able to spend some time together in Tampa, Florida, before his regiment left with the American forces for Cuba. Their meeting strengthened their bond and steeled Theodore for the possibility of wounds and death ahead. While she returned to Sagamore Hill to await news from the army, her husband had his moment of wartime fame on the battlefields of Cuba on 1 July 1898. The victory that he and his unit, dubbed Roosevelt’s Rough Riders, achieved on the San Juan Heights made him a national hero. He came back to the United States in August where he rejoined Edith at the temporary camp at Montauk, New Jersey. She worked in the hospital among those who had been wounded or sickened in Cuba. Meanwhile, the political world buzzed with the rumors that Theodore would be nominated for governor that autumn.

By early October, Theodore was the Republican candidate and involved in a vigorous campaign. Edith attended one major rally but spent much of the time dealing with the flood of mail that her husband received. For the rest of their life together, the burdens of Theodore’s celebrity would be a constant background theme of Edith’s existence. In November 1898, success came with an 18,000-vote triumph over Theodore’s Democratic rival.

Theodore’s victory in the 1898 gubernatorial contest owed much to the indispensable assistance of the influential New York attorney, Elihu Root. When questions arose about the Republican candidate’s precise residence and his ability to serve, Root stilled the doubters. The friendship between Theodore and Root deepened. For Edith, however, Root was less appealing. He often told stories about her relationship with her husband that she did not appreciate. On a cold winter’s night, Theodore went outside and said, “How beautiful the full moon is on the snow.” To which Edith replied, “You ought to have on your winter drawers.” Root “told that very often until she didn’t seem to like it and I quit.” Still a certain coolness remained between Edith and Theodore’s friend.

By Christmas 1898, Edith was preparing to move her family into...
the huge governor’s mansion in Albany. Sworn in on 2 January 1899, Theodore plunged into the duties of his new office with his customary energy. Edith faced the crowds of people who clamored to see the new state executive with her arms full of flowers. In that way she could avoid in a delicate manner having to shake hands with the flood of well-wishers. This tactic became her trademark during the decade that followed. Soon the Roosevelts had settled into their new life in the structure that Alice called “a hideous building with dreary dark furniture and a funereal air.”

Edith Roosevelt brightened up the mansion with new art as her husband brought in guests from all walks of life. She told Cecil Spring Rice that “we have never been happier in our lives than we are now,” though her thoughts often went back to earlier times in Washington. For the first time since her marriage, her desire for privacy and quiet family times was at odds with Theodore’s growing popularity. As the chief executive of the nation’s most populous state, his name was mentioned as a possible future president or even as vice president with William McKinley in 1900. The death of Vice President Garret A. Hobart in November 1899 intensified such speculation.

The newspaper coverage that Edith now encountered forecast what lay ahead for her in the White House. The receptions she held as the first lady of New York received attention in papers as far away as Kansas City. Family outings drew a cluster of reporters to track the doings of herself and her children. The verdict was that she was “Roosevelt’s chum” and “a quiet, unassuming . . . modest, housewifely little body.” She was, in short, “the sort of woman one feels it would be good to know.”

One of the friends who came to see her in Albany during the late winter of 1899 was Frances Wolcott, whose troubled marriage had now collapsed with a public announcement of an imminent divorce. The rupture of the Washington power couple made headlines across the country. Mrs. Wolcott fled Washington gossip to spend “a week with Gov. and Mrs. Roosevelt in Albany.” In those days, Edith learned that Senator Wolcott wanted out of his marriage in order to marry a much younger woman, Mrs. Daisy Gordon de Maude. To the public, the impending split was portrayed as simple incompatibility, but in private Frances Wolcott was very bitter. Washington opinion stood with the wronged woman.
The actual divorce did not occur until the spring of 1900. Frances Wolcott fled to Europe to avoid the social disgrace. Before she did so, she met the actress Eleanor Robson. “Referring sadly to her lined and almost accordion-pleated skin, she said to Robson, ‘You have only to look at my face to know that a man has walked all over it.’” 38 As for the senator, Daisy Gordon de Maude threw over Senator Wolcott and married Daniel R. Hanna, the son of Marcus A. Hanna. These sordid events intensified Edith Roosevelt’s contempt for the wayward practices of the upper classes, and she resolved to help Frances Wolcott regain her standing in society at some point in the future. 39

By the spring of 1900, the possibility of Theodore Roosevelt going on the national ticket with President McKinley had become endemic in Republican circles. Edith resisted the prospect of a return to Washington, despite her love for the nation’s capital. Theodore was now earning a good salary and the money worries of the past seemed behind them. Being vice president would involve a $2,000 cut in pay and demanding personal expenses for entertaining. With Theodore, Jr., and Kermit on the eve of prep school at Groton in Connecticut and Alice as an impending debutante, expenses were bound to rise. Beyond all that was the personal danger that might come with Theodore in the more visible role of the vice presidency. When a New York politician told Edith that her husband would likely be nominated for vice president at the Republican national convention in June 1900, she responded: “You disagreeable thing. I don’t want to see him nominated for the vice presidency.” 40

Edith told her husband about her feelings, and he conveyed them to his friends when the possibility of the vice presidency arose. Yet, Theodore never went the final step of saying he would decline the vice presidency if it were offered to him. When he decided to attend the national convention wearing his Rough Rider hat from Cuba, his selection became inevitable. Edith was there, too. Because Senator Wolcott was facing a difficult reelection campaign in Colorado, the Republican hierarchy had designated him to give the keynote address to the throng. In what must have been an ironic moment, newspapers reported that Edith frequently joined in the applause “which followed some of his utterances.” Reporters noted that she had “a pleasant smile and cheery remark for everybody, and her eyes often
wandered to the place where was seated the Governor, who paid close
attention to all that was going on.”

On 21 June, amid scenes of great enthusiasm, Theodore Roosevelt
became the Republican candidate for vice president. First, he gave
one of the seconding speeches for President McKinley. Standing on
the rostrum, waiting for the applause to die down, he caught sight of
Edith in the crowd. “Then he smiled till his teeth showed, and Mrs.
Roosevelt fluttered back her handkerchief.” Later, when the con-
vention nominated Theodore for vice president, Mrs. Roosevelt
scanned the parading delegates demonstrating for her husband. “She
was pale as paper, but appeared smiling and happy.” Whatever his
personal feelings about the vice presidency, Theodore Roosevelt
adapted at once to his new role and proclaimed his wife happy with
the outcome, too. As he wrote a friend, “you will be pleased that Mrs.
Roosevelt has begun to look at the matter our way now.”

There remained one additional ceremonial event for Theodore
Roosevelt and his family. In those days, the two candidates received
delegations to “notify” them that they had been nominated to run for
national office. So on 13 July 1900, the ubiquitous Senator Wolcott,
chair of the committee to notify the vice presidential candidate, led a
delegation to Oyster Bay on a day of oppressive heat. Six parlor cars
of Republican dignitaries made their way along the shore of Long Is-
land where an enthusiastic crowd had assembled. At the entrance of
Sagamore Hill, the candidate and Edith Roosevelt stood to receive the
guests. “There was no attempt at formality.” Standing on the veranda,
with Edith and his two daughters behind him, Theodore gave his
speech. A brief lunch followed, with no liquor and ice tea as the only
beverage, and in the warmth of the day some of the visitors, includ-
ing Senator Wolcott, sprawled on the Oyster Bay lawn. What Edith
thought of her friend’s philandering former husband taking his ease
at Sagamore Hill is not recorded. By 2:00 in the afternoon the pro-
cedings were over and the guests had returned to New York City.

Once the official presidential campaign began, Theodore took to
the stump as the main speaker for the Republicans. President McKin-
ley observed the tradition that the incumbent did not make a per-
sonal canvass of the voters. The families of the presidential and vice
presidential candidates did not go along on the campaign trail. Edith
and the children stayed at Sagamore Hill and vacationed in Connecticut while Theodore wooed the voters.

The intersection of Roosevelt and Senator Wolcott occurred again when the vice presidential candidate campaigned in Colorado. The two men and their party came under mob assault at the small town of Victor. Democrats later charged that Roosevelt and Wolcott had been drunk the night before, an allegation that Theodore and the senator denied with heat and accuracy.

The rest of the campaign was less stormy as the ticket of McKinley and Roosevelt cruised to a sweeping victory in November. For Edith Roosevelt, there were two signs of the impending change in her position. It was a custom in those days for local charities to solicit handkerchiefs and dolls or other personal items from famous women to be auctioned off at a church fair or other occasion. Edith received such a request and complied with it. Other solicitations soon flowed in, and the Roosevelts had to stop the practice for the moment. The importunities would resume once they were in the White House.44

Both Edith and Theodore had resisted any newspaper requests for photographs of the children or Mrs. Roosevelt herself. Some unauthorized images had become public. With the election to the vice presidency, such a restrictive policy became more and more impractical. The couple decided to have formal photographs taken and then released first to the prestigious and respectable journal Harper’s Weekly and then to the rest of the press corps. That was done early in 1901 as the inauguration approached.45

Edith did not look forward to the vice presidency with any anticipation. It was, she wrote her sister, “a useless & empty position,” and her husband would simply be “like the bridegroom at a wedding, no one even sees or thinks of him.”46 The social obligations would be large, the costs of living in Washington a drain on the family income, and her husband would have little of substance to occupy his restless energies. Theodore was already anticipating a presidential race in 1904, especially after McKinley disavowed any interest in a third term in June 1901.

Edith joined her husband at the inauguration on 4 March 1901 and then returned to Oyster Bay. The woman who took the train north stood on the edge of national fame. She turned 40 on 6 August 1901 with her fifteenth wedding anniversary approaching in December.
To those who knew Edith Roosevelt, she was an impressive individual who radiated a sense of inner confidence and assurance about her place in the world. Part of her remained inscrutable and aloof from even those who had spent decades with her. “I believe you could live in the same house with Edith for fifty years and never really know her,” observed one of her school friends.47

Within the family, Edith was known for her tart wit and her unsparing assessment of the politicians and public figures that she encountered. Sometimes her sharp tongue could be turned on her children and even her husband. Theodore took the resulting ribbing as part of the affection that the two Roosevelts shared. As he told the French ambassador, Jules Jusserand, “people think I have a good-natured wife, but she has a humor which is more tyrannical than half the tempestuous women of Shakespeare.” Whether she was in fact “mean as a snake” with her children, as one relative contended, she did not abide fools or dullards with any internal patience.48

Theodore Roosevelt was a prodigious reader, but his wife may well have equaled his devotion to literature and commitment to reading. Her letters to her son Kermit are filled with comments on the books she had read and she suggested titles for him to consider as part of his larger education. While she and Theodore read many books in common, she commented after his death that their tastes in literature differed and she was never sure whether he would like a book or not. Edith preferred authors such as William Makepeace Thackeray and other nineteenth-century British writers. She did, however, have a strong interest in French authors such as Racine and German writers of the same period. In her book hunting, the future first lady patronized Loudermilk’s bookstore in Washington where she sought elusive editions and fresh titles. She also enjoyed what she called “snooping” for antiques and artifacts at sales and auctions.49

No wife of the advocate of the strenuous life, Theodore Roosevelt, could remain inside and not become involved in his active pursuits in the out-of-doors. Edith was the last first lady for whom horseback riding and well-equipped stables were parts of daily existence. As the Brooklyn Eagle noted in December 1898, “On any fine day, when the crisp fall winds blow the seared brown leaves along the rural roads of the outlying meadows of Oyster Bay, she may be seen mounted on a handsome horse cantering swiftly.” Newspapers reported that she
was a talented rider “who looks fresh and girlish in a black riding habit.” They rode in all kinds of weather on “a gallop along the roads of Maryland and Virginia.”

In addition to her reading and riding, Edith Roosevelt devoted a substantial amount of her spare time to charitable needlework. She belonged to the St. Hilda Sewing Circle of Christ Episcopal Church in Oyster Bay, which met to make “all sorts of garments for the worthy poor.” She was “one of the most industrious of the needlewomen who make clothing for the poor.” One of the members of the group said that Edith Roosevelt “is constantly planning for those less fortunately situated than herself.” After she became first lady, she accepted the honorary presidency of the Needlework Guild of Washington, and notified the group that she would contribute the clothing required from each member before 1 December 1901.

Her philosophy about needlework received its clearest statement in an organizing letter she sent out in 1918 as honorary president of the national Needlework Guild. The object was “to provide new and suitable garments of wearing and household linen for the poor and sick.” It worked through “quiet and effective means” to supply “necessary comfort to countless needy ones.” Operating from local town branches with Garment Members, Money Members, and Directors, the guilds collected clothes each fall for distribution to local charities. Nonsectarian and locally based, the guilds were part of “the great Tree” of the organization which was “near and dear to my heart.”

Edith Roosevelt had also acquired a taste for classical music in her youth. One magazine article referred to music as her “particular passion” and had her as an adept pianist, but the latter talent seems not to have been among her skills. She was an inveterate concert-goer and enjoyed inviting artists to entertain at her home. She had a particular fondness for the works of Richard Wagner and was a patron for a benefit performance of “Hansel and Gretel” by Engelbert Humperdinck during the White House years. Her taste was much more sophisticated than that of her husband, who liked marches and familiar tunes that he could hum.

The summer of 1901 passed much as the family had planned until the sudden and tragic events of 6 September 1901. Now Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt was the new first lady as the nation looked to the incoming president for guidance and leadership.