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Woodrow Wilson
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INTRODUCTION

Ross A. Kennedy

Few presidents had such a dramatic and consequential tenure in office as Woodrow Wilson. He presided over the climax of the progressive reform movement, America’s involvement in World War I, and a tumultuous battle with the US Senate over the League of Nations, a battle that would shape American foreign policy for years to come. He was an intensely controversial figure, scorned by Theodore Roosevelt as the worst President since James Buchanan and compared favorably to Lincoln by Ida Tarbell. He introduced racial segregation into federal offices but helped to secure the vote for women; worried about the fate of democracy in wartime yet instituted one of the most sustained attacks on America’s constitutional freedoms ever in the nation’s history; and promoted self-determination for oppressed peoples while militarily intervening in the internal affairs of several independent nations, including Mexico and Russia. In short, President Wilson was a profoundly important and complicated leader for a crucial eight-year period of American history.

Scholarly writing on Wilson began almost immediately after he left office in 1921 and has never let up. The literature that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s, not surprisingly, was essentially an extension of the debates that swirled around Wilson while he was in office. Much of it – and certainly the most widely read books – focused on Wilson’s policies concerning World War I. On one side, “revisionist” writers such as John Kenneth Turner (1922) and Walter Millis (1935) condemned the President for taking America into a war they considered irrelevant to US national security. Echoing the views put forward at the time by progressives opposed to US entry into the war, revisionists argued that the European conflict originated out of the flaws of balance-of-power politics rather than German aggression and that even if the Germans won the war, they, along with the other belligerents, would be too exhausted to threaten the United States. Strict neutrality, then, would have been the wise course for the United

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States to pursue after the war started. Instead, swayed by Allied propaganda, economic interests invested in the Allied cause, and his own cultural identification with the British, Wilson foolishly aligned the United States with the Allies. He failed to stand up for US neutral rights when Britain infringed upon them with its maritime system while simultaneously he confronted Germany over its submarine warfare. This posture led to intensifying clashes with Germany that ultimately drove the United States into the war. Revisionists further argued that nothing positive came from this tragic chain of events. At the Paris Peace Conference, Wilson failed to persuade the victorious Allies to abandon power politics and ended up compromising away his vision of a moderate peace based on the Fourteen Points. The result was a vindictive, unjust peace treaty sure to lead to future conflict. Only by rejecting the treaty and the League of Nations did the United States manage to extricate itself from the European tar pit it had been led into by Wilson’s misguided policies.

While revisionists dominated the scholarship of the interwar period, other writers advanced different viewpoints. Conservative critics of the President, such as Henry Cabot Lodge (1925), attacked Wilson for not acting against Germany earlier and more decisively, and for pursuing the unworkable project of the League of Nations instead of protecting specific US interests like the Monroe Doctrine. The President’s former aides, meanwhile, rallied to Wilson’s defense. Ray Stannard Baker (1927–37), for example, produced an authoritative, multivolume biography portraying him as a sensible leader committed to neutrality and a practical peace settlement based on international reform. His Wilson was a skilled and inspiring statesman, not a tool of financial interests.

Following World War II, a new generation of writers examined Wilson, some of the most famous names being Richard Hofstadter (1948) and John Morton Blum (1956). By far the most important figure in post-revisionist Wilson scholarship, however, was Arthur S. Link. He devoted his entire career to studying Wilson, writing countless books and articles on the President and his times and producing a massive, multi-archival five-volume biography covering Wilson’s life up to April 1917 (Link 1947–65). He looms very large over virtually all subsequent Wilson scholarship, as the chapters in this volume attest. While not uncritical of Wilson, Link usually casts him in a favorable light. He sees Wilson as a highly intelligent, fair-minded, and forceful leader, both as an academic reformer at Princeton and as a politician, first as Governor of New Jersey and then as President. For Link, Wilson’s domestic policies as President, tagged the “New Freedom” during the 1912 presidential campaign, expressed a moderate brand of progressivism, especially during the early part of his first term. To be sure, Link does not see Wilson’s initial achievements – notably tariff reform, the creation of the Federal Reserve banking system, and antitrust legislation – as minor. Indeed, he thinks the Federal Reserve bill, the “greatest single piece of constructive legislation of the Wilson era,” succeeded “remarkably well” in bringing greater stability and democratic regulation to the nation’s banking system (Link 1954: 52–3). But Wilson was not “a progressive of the advanced persuasion” early in his presidency, according to Link, and his legislative victories, while certainly the product of impressive political skills, were won “with a minimum of concession to advanced progressive concepts” (Link 1954: 80).

Wilson changed course, though, as the 1916 presidential election approached. In the first half of the year or so, the President nominated Louis D. Brandeis, the “peo-
ple’s lawyer” to the Supreme Court, and pushed through Congress, among other things, a shipping bill, which brought the federal government into the business of building up and regulating a merchant marine; a rural credits bill providing for the federal government to underwrite farm loan banks; a workmen’s compensation measure for federal employees; a child labor bill; the Revenue Act of 1916, which established the first truly progressive federal tax code; and the Adamson Act, which included an eight-hour day for interstate railway workers. It was a startling record of landmark achievements – in Link’s words, “the most sweeping and significant progressive legislation in the history of the country up to that time” (Link 1954: 225). It occurred, Link argues, partly out of electoral calculation: Wilson knew he needed the votes of progressives to win in 1916. But it also reflected Wilson’s intellectual flexibility, his willingness to move with the trend of thinking in progressive circles that had occurred since 1912 and to embrace a more nationalistic means to realize democratic principles he had long cared about. In so doing, Wilson transformed the Democratic Party “into an agency of advanced nationalistic reform,” a development Link suggests cast a long shadow over the future of American politics (Link 1964: 323).

In his treatment of Wilson’s foreign policies, Link discusses the administration’s involvement with Mexico, Latin America, Asia, and Russia to varying degrees, but is clearly most interested in Wilson’s approach to World War I. Here, he argues Wilson was neither the utopian moralist denounced by “realists” like Robert Osgood (1953) and George Kennan (1951) nor the pro-Ally protector of American financiers portrayed by the revisionists. Instead, Wilson strove to be genuinely neutral toward the belligerents; if American neutrality favored the British, that outcome was a product of circumstances and international law, not Wilson’s own biases. The British followed international law in their maritime system much more than the Germans did in their submarine warfare, Link argues, and Wilson saw no advantage for the United States in forcefully challenging that system. The President’s chief concern in the neutrality period was to mediate an end to the war, which he rightly perceived was a disaster for Europe, and to lay the basis for the reform of power politics once the war was over. A “peace without victory,” a peace based on the status quo ante bellum, was the best way to accomplish these objectives, as it would preclude the bitterness and resentments that might animate the losing side in a peace of conquest. Unfortunately, the Germans rebuffed Wilson’s mediation efforts and unleashed their submarines upon American shipping in early 1917. To have any chance of preserving America’s prestige and its influence over the peace settlement, Wilson saw he had no choice but to enter the war. But he never gave up his quest for a moderate peace, expressed during the war period most notably in his Fourteen Points Address. Against stiff odds in Paris, Link argues, “Wilson won a settlement that honored more of the fourteen points than it violated and which to a large degree vindicated his liberal ideals” (Link 1979: 102). The President also managed to create a viable agency of international reform, the League of Nations. This vision was defeated by “limited internationalists” wary of political commitments overseas, however, and by the collapse of Wilson’s health, which probably prevented Wilson from reaching a compromise with his opponents (Link 1979: 109). Still, Link emphasizes, Wilson’s program was sound; it was a tragedy for the United States and the world that the Senate failed to adopt it.
Link abandoned his biography of Wilson in 1966 in favor of editing Wilson’s papers for publication. This became a massive project, with the papers and indexes running to 69 volumes when it was finally completed in 1994. It stands as one of greatest editorial achievements of the last century. Remarkably, the *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Link et al. 1966–94) contains not only outgoing speeches, letters, and writings by Wilson, but also most (though not all) of the important incoming material that crossed Wilson’s desk, as well as relevant diary entries by those who came into contact with him. Each volume also has a useful introduction and later ones have appendices dealing with Wilson’s health. Anyone working on Wilson or his era stands indebted to Link and the other editors, as they have made research on these topics immeasurably easier than was the case before the *Papers* were published.

Since the 1960s, as the chapters in this volume show, the scholarship on Wilson has used the *Papers* and other sources often to develop lines of research and interpretation different from those of Link and his generation, and sharply in contrast with the portrait of Wilson promoted by the revisionists. Scholars have re-interpreted Wilson’s relationship to progressivism, women’s rights, race relations, imperialism, revolutions abroad, and World War I, to name but a few of the subjects addressed by historians in recent decades. No less than when he was alive, Wilson remains a figure of controversy, both in academia and in political discourse. The chapters in this volume will provide readers with the historiographic background necessary to make sense of those arguments and, one hopes, to contribute to the debate themselves.

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References


Part I

TO THE PRESIDENCY
Chapter One

WILSON THE MAN

Mark Benbow

Birth and Early Childhood

Woodrow Wilson was born shortly before midnight on December 28, 1856 in the small town of Staunton, Virginia, a heavily Scotch-Irish area in the Shenandoah Mountains. Wilson was the third of four children born to the Reverend Joseph Ruggles Wilson and Janet Woodrow Wilson. The first of two sons, Wilson was doted on by his parents and his two older sisters; Marion, born in 1851, and Anne, born in 1853. Wilson’s younger brother, Joseph, was born in 1867. Wilson’s father was minister at Staunton’s First Presbyterian Church and Wilson was a child of the manse in many respects. Not only was his father a minister in the Presbyterian Church, so were his maternal grandfather and a maternal uncle, James Woodrow. Indeed, Janet Wilson’s family could brag numerous Presbyterian notables in Britain.

While Staunton was Wilson’s birthplace, it was not his home for long. Wilson would spend his childhood in Georgia and the Carolinas as his father moved from one church to another as his career waxed and then waned. In 1858 Joseph accepted a call by the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. A larger more prestigious church in a larger more prominent town than Staunton, Wilson’s new church home would be the family’s home for 12 years. His first memories were formed in Augusta. In November 1860, Wilson remembered, he heard a man running down the street yelling that Abraham Lincoln had been elected and there would be a war. The Wilson family supported the Confederacy. Although not a slave owner himself, Joseph and his family benefitted in both Staunton and Augusta from slaves and, perhaps, free black servants hired by the congregation to work in the manse. Joseph supported slavery from his pulpit, joined a local home defense unit during the war, and traveled to Richmond, the Confederate capital, to inspect hospitals. His Augusta church was used by the Confederate Army as a field hospital and as a holding pen for Union prisoners-of-war.

One cannot help but wonder how seeing wounded, dying, and dead soldiers may have affected the young Tommy Wilson, although historian John Milton Cooper notes that Wilson later claimed “there was no more glorious way to die than in battle” and Cooper notes “if the Civil War left an imprint on the boy or the man, it was buried so deep as to be imponderable (Cooper 2009: 18). On the other hand, in the same conversation with his aide Colonel Edward House, in which Wilson referred to dying in battle as “glorious,” he also noted that war was economically “ruinous.” This reflected another part of his experience growing up in the wartime and post-warthime south, seeing the destruction of the defeated Confederacy close-up and living through both Reconstruction and the beginnings of the New South’s movement to rebuild and to industrialize the region. Indeed, Wilson’s experience as a boy is unique among American presidents. While the United States has had many veterans as their chief executive and Andrew Jackson saw war as a youth, only Wilson saw war first hand as a child and on the losing side as well. It did not make him a partisan of the “Lost Cause.” He later remarked how because he loved the south, he was glad it lost the war. Arthur Link noted that although Wilson “was a southerner” he “failed to act and think like a southerner” and “in his strident affirmation of American nationalism and condemnation of sectionalism, indeed went far toward repudiating identification of the South,” (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 27, 113). This point can be easy to overstate, as Link in fact may have. Wilson did not reject the south, but as Cooper notes, he was “inoculated against the larger environment around him” and his family did “not have deep roots” in the region (Cooper 2009: 23). In short, Wilson rose above a regional partisanship although in college he did sometimes argue with northern classmates over regional politics.

Wilson’s education in Augusta was somewhat irregular in part due to the disruption of life in the south during and after the war, but also because Wilson may have suffered from a learning disability. What is known is that he did not learn the alphabet until he was nine years old and did not learn to read until he was about twelve. The Civil War disrupted schools throughout the south, and the region had lagged behind New England and the Midwest in establishing public schools even before the war. After the war Wilson enrolled in Joseph T. Derry’s “select classical institution” where he struggled with some of his lessons. His father added his own efforts by taking Wilson on trips to places in the area, such as workshops and factories, then having his son write an essay about what he had seen. If Joseph felt that Woodrow had not used a correct term he would press the boy to find the right word. The rest of Wilson’s family also did their best to educate him: his mother, his Aunt Marion, and his sisters all worked with him. Wilson, however, struggled to learn even the basics, although he loved being read to. His father revealed some of his frustration when he remarked that if they could not make a scholar out of his son, at least they could make him a gentleman (Baker 1927a: 42–3, 59–60; Weinstein 1981: 14–15).

The Reverend Wilson’s efforts and Woodrow’s struggles have prompted a debate among historians over possible cause and effect. Wilson spun a tall tale for reporter William Bayard Hale, producer of Wilson’s 1912 campaign biography, that Joseph delayed his son’s education because he did not want Woodrow to learn about the world first from books, but rather from the father. Alexander and Juliette George rejected this idea and cast the father as the villain in the son’s life in one of the most controversial theories about Wilson. The Georges used Wilson’s relationship with his
friend and advisor Colonel Edward M. House to examine Wilson’s relationship with his father, and how that affected Wilson’s personality and policymaking. Joseph was a perfectionist tyrant in their telling, and young Tommy they claim refused to learn to read to defy the father the only way he knew how (George and George 1964: 7). The Georges see what they portray as Wilson’s unconscious rebellion as setting a pattern that he followed into adulthood: “throughout his life his relationships with others seemed shaped by an inner command never again to bend his will to another man’s,” (George and George 1964: 11). In contrast, John Mulder suggested that Wilson’s father “apparently was not particularly eager that his son learn to read” and so did not push him, the exact opposite of the Georges suggestion (Mulder 1978: 31). Wilson’s earliest major biographer, Ray Stannard Baker, quoted the reason Wilson himself gave: “Tommy himself was backward – ‘lazy’ he called himself,” (Baker 1927a: 36).

The current most popular explanation for Wilson’s early learning difficulty, which is in opposition to the Georges’, came from Professor of Neurology and Wilson biographer Edwin Weinstein, who argued that Wilson’s difficulties lay in a learning disability, specifically dyslexia. Weinstein noted that Wilson remained a very slow reader throughout his life, that he had tremendous difficulties learning to read German or French for his studies, that he struggled with basic math, and that he was only a “fair” speller (Weinstein 1981: 15–18). Weinstein’s explanation remains popular among more recent Wilson biographers, as it would explain a great deal about his education and his career. John Milton Cooper attributes the young Wilson’s difficulty in learning to read to physical problems, including poor vision, which may have gone undetected until he was an adult. However, he also notes that there is evidence to support Weinstein’s claims, such as Wilson’s quickly learning to write with his left hand as an adult after suffering semi-paralysis in his right hand. Cooper, however, notes that Wilson did well in Latin, Greek, and French in school, and learned shorthand, which may argue against the dyslexia thesis (Cooper 2009: 19–20).

Aside from formal educational subjects, Wilson also acquired some of his father’s sense of humor. Joseph was known as an incurable punster, and Wilson picked up the love of clever wordplay. Wilson not only enjoyed puns, but limericks, which he often repeated to friends. His favorite was:

For beauty I am not a star,
There are others more handsome by far.
But my face I don’t mind it,
For I am behind it,
It’s the people in front that I jar.

Dialect humor was another Wilson favorite, which included “darkie” jokes, told in an exaggerated black dialect. Cooper noted that these jokes betrayed “touches of ethnic and racial prejudice, though innocently intended.” Weinstein discusses Wilson’s love of humor in his family life, and how he “charmed” his daughters when they were children, but does not discuss the racial aspect of Wilson’s joking. Such humor was very popular at the time, and Wilson told such jokes to both family and friends to their enjoyment. Cooper is most likely correct in that they were meant
“innocently” and Wilson probably would have been surprised had someone told him they were offensive. Nonetheless, while Wilson’s humor does show a playful side of him that the public rarely saw, his love of dialect humor does illustrate how he had absorbed the racial culture of his time (Tumulty 1921: 476; Baker 1927b: 47–8; Smith 1966: 203; Weinstein 1981: 112–13; Cooper 2009: 68).

The Wilson family enjoyed singing in groups of family and friends and Woodrow was described as having a pleasant voice. Joseph also enjoyed playing billiards, which was a bit unusual for a Protestant minister in the south at the time, and his son had a table as an adult at Princeton and in the White House. Reverend Wilson also enjoyed “an occasional” Scotch whiskey, a taste shared by his son when Woodrow was an adult. Joseph also smoked heavily, a habit Woodrow did not share. Both men also enjoyed the company of women. Joseph was handsome and even enjoyed a relationship with another woman after his wife died, despite his elder son’s disapproval. Woodrow had an unsuccessful courtship before meeting his first wife and wrote passionate love letters to both his wives. He also had numerous long friendships with several women. In short, neither father nor son was a humorless prig and both enjoyed many of life’s pleasures, at least in moderation (Cooper 2009: 14).

What then, of the father’s influence on Wilson’s education? The Georges accurately noted that the father was a perfectionist in his efforts to teach his son. Baker, probably Wilson’s most sympathetic biographer, wrote that Joseph “never permitted the use of an incorrect word” in his son’s written essays (Baker 1927a: 37). Nonetheless, Joseph seems to have been a loving father with a sense of humor, and the two were close until the father’s death in his son’s home at the age of 80 in 1903.

It is also clear that Woodrow came to represent Joseph’s dreams of achieving respect and success in a career as the father’s career seemed to stall. In the autumn of 1870 the family moved to South Carolina as Joseph took a job at Columbia Theological Seminary as an instructor. The Reverend Wilson found his experience in Columbia frustrating and his ambition balked as he ran into battles with colleagues and students, often over what seemed to be petty concerns. For example, while at the seminary, Wilson also served as minister to Columbia’s First Presbyterian Church until resigning when the session indicated that they wanted a fulltime minister. Wilson then scheduled chapel at the seminary at the same time as the services at First Presbyterian. Reverend Wilson then insisted that students attend his Sunday services rather than those elsewhere. While this may have been an attempt by Joseph to keep the students from a minister he considered inferior or doctrinally unsound, it most likely was a question of ego. Mulder claims, “Wilson’s motivation was, no doubt, partly personal pique.” The students won their battle and Joseph resigned (Mulder 1978: 14–15).

In 1874, after not quite four years in Columbia, the Wilson’s moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, where Joseph accepted an offer from the city’s First Presbyterian Church. It was a small church, and the congregation often had problems paying their minister’s salary. Joseph’s career had peaked (Mulder 1978: 14–17). John Mulder notes that Joseph “attempted to deal with his personal failure” in two ways. First he used his Christian faith to trust that God had a purpose. But he also saw in his son “the opportunity to achieve the success that he had sought in vain” (Mulder 1978: 27). Cooper simply writes, “From Tommy’s late teens on, Joseph Wilson’s circumstances conspired to make his older son the main object of his hopes and dreams”
(Cooper 2009: 21). Of course, it is not unusual for a parent to see their child’s success in this way, and if Joseph encouraged his son’s success as a way to deal with his own failures, it seems not to have poisoned their relationship.

While considering Wilson’s education and religious upbringing it should not be forgotten that he had a happy childhood with friends and playmates. Even Wilson’s best biographers, such as Arthur Link and Cooper, pay only a bare minimum of attention to Wilson’s childhood apart from the role of his father and his education, in part because there is a lack of documentation. But Wilson’s “official” biographer and friend, Ray Stannard Baker, talked to Wilson about his childhood, and he interviewed members of Wilson’s family and some of his childhood friends. As a result, we can have a somewhat more balanced view of Wilson’s boyhood away from books and church. For example, Wilson was the leader and second baseman of the Lightfoot Baseball team, which met in the loft of the manse’s barn in Augusta. As Baker notes, “the chief decoration was a portrait in red of His Satanic Majesty, torn from an advertisement for devilled ham” (Baker 1927a: 45; Mulder 1978: 43). This is not the work of a boy who is lost in books and religion. Woodrow and his cousin, Jessie Bones, painted their faces with berry juice and pretended they were in James Fenmore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. He once skipped school to watch a circus parade, stuffing the back of his pants with cotton to pad the inevitable spanking that would come from his teacher, Mr. Derry (Baker 1927a: 44–5). In the margins of his school books one can still see the young Woodrow’s doodles: a troop train of soldiers from the Civil War, observation balloons (one flying a Confederate flag), and a greyhound named “Mountain Boy” that was the family pet. In other words, he had a normal childhood with friends and playmates and he occasionally got into trouble (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 1, 5–6).

While living in Columbia Wilson officially joined the Presbyterian Church by giving a confession of faith along with two other boys. This was standard Presbyterian practice, but there is no doubt that part of the influence on Woodrow from his father was religious. Wilson adopted his father’s southern Presbyterian Calvinism without much, if any, question. He also continued his secular education, attending Charles Barnwell’s school where he studied, among his other courses, Latin and Greek.

Of more interest to historians was Wilson’s coping mechanism for dealing with the normal disruptions and uncertainties of puberty; an active fantasy life centered on the sea. While living in Columbia and Wilmington the young man created imaginary fleets with himself as commander. Usually casting himself as a titled British officer, Wilson showed an affinity for his mother’s homeland that never left him. He also demonstrated a flair for creating organizations, as he not only created a fantasy fleet, he organized it into squadrons with names for all the officers and ships, sometimes using the names of friends and schoolmates. Once he created his own paper navy, Woodrow set sail in his imaginations, tracking down pirates and finding adventure. While living in Wilmington, Wilson also spent time visiting the docks and studying the ships (Baker 1927a: 60; Weinstein 1981: 19; Cooper 2009: 22).

Mulder places a bit more significance on this than do Wilson’s other biographers, referring to his organization of the “Royal United Kingdom Yacht Club” as “Wilson’s first constitution” and claims that it reflected the young man’s “desire for order and structure . . . a means of compensating for the sudden and unhappy move by the Wilson family to Wilmington” (Mulder 1978: 43). Other recent books emphasizing
the role of covenant theology on Wilson’s worldview have placed a similar emphasis on the Yacht Club fantasy (see Magee 2008 and Benbow 2010a). Weinstein refers to Wilson’s fantasy life as “normal features of intellectual growth” but places no significance on the theological aspect of constitutions (Weinstein 1981: 19). Link treats the episode in the same context as Weinstein, as revealing his passion, even at an early age, for constitutional order (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 1, 56 n1). In contrast, Cooper mentions it in passing but assigns no special significance to Wilson’s fantasy life. It is tempting for a historian to find significance in an event early in a famous person’s life, but in this instance, the creation of a detailed constitution for an imaginary yacht club does fit a pattern Wilson repeated throughout his life, reaching its culmination with the League of Nations.

College

Wilson did not live in Wilmington long. In the 1873–74 school year he enrolled in Davidson College, a small Presbyterian school in Davidson, North Carolina. Wilson joined the campus debating club, the Eumenean Society, and the baseball team where he played centerfield. His grades were generally good despite poor preparation for some of his classes. He was initially put on probation in both Greek and mathematics, both of which he managed to pass. Wilson’s best marks came in logic and rhetoric, composition, English, and declamation (public speaking). He spent much of his time alone reading, even though he did have friends and remained active on campus. Wilson’s year at Davidson cemented his interest in debating clubs. He was very active in the Eumenean Society. He loved their discussions on books, the issues of the day, and about great men. He was a fan of British Prime Minister William Gladstone and kept a portrait of him over his desk. Wilson was already an effective public speaker as a young man, and he sought out the debating society not only at Davidson, but also later at Princeton and at the University of Virginia, where he attended law school. The life of the mind charmed Wilson, but it was a life he wanted to share with friends to discuss ideas and leaders (Baker 1927a: 73–6).

Only 16 years old, Wilson may have still been too immature to move away from home. He only studied at Davidson for one year before returning home suffering from “ill health,” which was probably homesickness according to Weinstein. Cooper writes that the reasons for Wilson leaving Davidson are “not clear” and Mulder simply refers to the years from 1872 to 1874 as “obviously a time of confusion and spiritual difficulty.” Baker blames Wilson’s leaving on his nearing a “physical breakdown” due to overwork, but as Weinstein notes, Wilson was not really in poor health. Baker, like other observers who knew Wilson late in his life, seems to have transposed Wilson’s poor health as a 60-year-old man with cardiovascular disease to the boy five decades before. White House physician and friend, Dr. Cary Grayson claimed that Wilson was “constitutionally . . . not . . . strong either as a youth, [or as] a young man.” Weinstein argues that Grayson was wrong, judging by how he appeared later in his life and suffering from cardiovascular disease. Instead, Wilson’s frequent health complaints, often of a generic “cold” reflected more of his mood than his health. When anxious or depressed, his mental state would be expressed as a physical ailment. This tendency was exacerbated by his overprotective mother, whose
letters to her son constantly expressed concerns over his health. Wilson later commonly joked about “how I clung to her (a laughed-at mamma’s boy) till I was a great big fellow,” but her constant flow of letters concerning his health did nothing to discourage his tendency to express stress as physical ailments. Cooper simply notes that later reports of Wilson’s ill health were probably inaccurate. Wilson’s classmates who later talked with Baker mention that he was quiet and studious, but not that he was in poor health. On the other hand, Wilson was young and had never been away from home for any length of time before, so this suggests that Weinstein is correct. Whatever the reason, Wilson only remained at Davidson for one year (Baker 1927a: 73–6; Grayson 1960: 80; Mulder 1978: 40; Weinstein 1981: 20–3; Cooper 2009: 18, 25).

Wilson returned to Wilmington to prepare for college, and to further lose himself in fantasies of naval heroics. He spent much of his time practicing shorthand, a skill he had studied hard to acquire and perfect beginning in 1872 while still in Columbia. Wilson studied the Graham shorthand system as a way to save time, and, probably, to help him deal with whatever learning disabilities made studying difficult for him. After he left Davidson, Wilson redoubled his efforts to master the difficult system, and between leaving Davidson in June 1874 and entering Princeton (then the College of New Jersey) in September 1875, he became proficient. For the rest of his life Wilson relied on shorthand while composing notes for articles, letters, and speeches. It also created some difficulties for later historians who needed to find translators for the archaic system (Link et al. 1966–94: vol. 1, 10–11).

Wilson entered Princeton as a freshman in the Class of 1879. Officially non-denominational, it was nonetheless heavily tied to Presbyterianism. The first of many colleges in the United States founded by Presbyterians, the school numbered among its presidents such church notables as Jonathan Edwards and John Witherspoon. Every one of its presidents had been a Presbyterian minister. Wilson himself would be the first to break that tradition when he became Princeton’s President in 1902. Its reputation had declined over the years, but when Wilson enrolled the school’s President was James McCosh, a Scottish minister who was busily, and effectively, reforming the college. Recruiting better professors and better students as well as expanding such facilities as its library, McCosh was remaking the school into a real university. However, despite McCosh, Princeton was still not, in Cooper’s words, “academically demanding.” This allowed plenty of time and opportunity for Wilson to read, study, and discuss the books he was reading, and the young man leapt to take advantage of the opportunities. His four years at Princeton did much to shape the scholar and leader that emerged as a University President, as Governor, and then as President of the United States (Mulder 1978: 44; Cooper 2009: 25–7).

Wilson joined one of the two debating and literary societies at Princeton. His choices were Whig and Clio and he joined the former, which welcomed southern underclassmen and, more importantly, favored political topics in its debates. Whig provided Wilson with invaluable experience as well as pleasure. Among the topics he debated his first year there was if Britain’s parliamentary system was superior to an American-style republic. Already fascinated by things British, Wilson returned to comparisons of the American and British systems again and again as a scholar. Whig taught lessons other than speaking in public and framing arguments. Princeton had banned the Greek letter fraternities that were rapidly growing on campuses around
the country, but Whig and Clio filled at least part of the same social role. They were self-governing, which allowed young men to experience and practice leadership roles among their peers. They provided ready-made friendships, and their secret rituals encouraged identification with a self-defined group. The schools’ “eating clubs” which not only provided meals, but, in many cases, a clubhouse, also acted as surrogate fraternities. Wilson joined “The Alligators” which was not among the more elite eating clubs. He must have enjoyed it though, as most of the members remained friends for the rest of their lives, Wilson included (Cooper 2009: 17).

In his sophomore year Wilson joined the new student newspaper, *The Princetonian*. He began writing letters and editorials and continued until his graduation. This not only gave Wilson valuable writing experience, but it reveals what issues were important to the young man. His first letter complained that little attention was paid on campus to oratory. Already a good speaker, Wilson no doubt wished for further chances to hone his skills, and to show them in public. This remained a major theme in Wilson’s writings in the paper: why were there not more chances for students to practice their public speaking, and to debate. Class work, of course, took up much of Wilson’s time. He still struggled with Greek, Latin and advanced mathematics, but devoting considerable effort to his work, he did well in all of his classes. He graduated in 1879, ranked thirty-eighth in his class of 167 (Cooper 2009: 28–9).

What did Wilson learn at Princeton, aside from his normal course of studies? As most undergraduates do, Wilson matured. He made friends, many of which lasted the rest of his life. His interest in politics, specifically how government formed and how they represented the will of the citizens, deepened. In 1879 he published an essay titled “Cabinet Government” in a Boston journal, the *International Review*. In it, Wilson discussed an idea that he would repeat in one form or another for decades, a desire to copy the parliamentary system of government debate in the United States. His experiences at Princeton – in classes, in Whig, in debates with friends and classmates – served to strengthen his belief that debating ideas openly was the most reliable way to determine and to shape the popular will, upon which government rested. Wilson felt so strongly about the power of open debate that in his senior year he refused to participate in a prestigious debate contest rather than take an assigned position, supporting a protective tariff, opposite Wilson’s actual belief. This incident not only revealed the strength of Wilson’s belief, but a stubborn streak, which he never lost. Abandoning a strongly felt position was unthinkable, even for something as minor as a college debate contest (Baker 1927a: 105; Cooper 2009: 30–2).

After graduating from Princeton, Wilson enrolled in the law school at the University of Virginia. He had already decided that he wanted to go into politics, setting his eyes upon the Senate where he could debate the major issues of the day. While at Princeton, he had hand-written several calling cards, which read “Thomas Woodrow Wilson. Senator from Virginia.” Then as now, many members of Congress were lawyers, so that seemed to be the most reliable route into politics. Wilson did not, interestingly enough, aim at being President. In part this may reflect his preference for a parliamentary style of government, where ruling parties had to defend their positions in debate or lose power. Of course, it could also simply reflect the reality of power in American politics at the time. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, political power in the United States lay with Congress, not with the President. Any