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THE JOURNAL OF FIRST LADIES STUDIES

INAUGURAL ISSUE

The mission of **First Ladies Association for Research and Education (FLARE)** is to create and sustain a network to promote and publicize research and education about the contributions, lives, impact, and lasting legacy of U.S. First Ladies.

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Contents

Editor's Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I write to introduce the inaugural issue of the *Journal of First Ladies Studies.* Published by the First Ladies Association for Research and Education (FLARE), this new journal will provide an interdisciplinary look at a broad range of topics about American first ladies. My hope is that the varied perspectives and methodologies contained in the articles that the journal aims to publish will ignite a field that I believe holds tremendous scholarly promise.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine a field of first ladies studies at all without a flagship journal that provides a forum for the latest scholarship, as well as a place for both established practitioners and rising scholars to stay abreast of the exciting work being done in the field. The *Journal of First Ladies Studies* is a peer-reviewed journal with a double-blind submission and review process. High standards for research and writing are hallmarks of this process.

The journal seeks scholarly submissions based on original research on any aspect of the study of American first ladies, including work that examines them within a historical context, adopts a comparative perspective, presents a theoretical approach, or offers an interdisciplinary framework for analysis in fields such as history, women's studies, communication, sociology, political science, material culture, and historic preservation. The possibilities for cutting-edge work are nearly limitless.

While I am a trained historian and biographer and feel most comfortable with the conventions and standards of these fields, I am sensitive to the ways in which scholars from other disciplines may differ in approach, and how they may depart from the field of history in terms of reviewing the scholarly literature within the body of an article, or how more technical details such as including footnote numbers within a paragraph or at paragraph's end may differ. The goal is to welcome a diverse set of scholars to the journal and further develop the field of first ladies studies.

It has been my good fortune to work with Diana B. Carlin, Anita B. McBride, and Nancy Kegan

Smith at FLARE. In 2024, they published their ground-breaking (and much needed) textbook, *U.S. First Ladies: Making History and Leaving Legacies.* I have used the book with great success in my course on American first ladies at Keuka College. In fact, I beta tested a portion of the book as it neared completion in my U.S. History survey course. The results opened my eyes to the possibilities of first ladies studies. Students enthusiastically embraced a topic of which they had very little prior knowledge. "We've never been taught this!" I heard from more than one of them.

As we sit on the cusp of America's 250th birthday, now is an opportune time to capitalize on what appears to be a burgeoning field of first ladies studies. Popular historians and academics have recently produced volumes on presidential spouses that have justifiably won high praise. Prominent authors have of course focused their attention on well-known first ladies—Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, Mary Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Lady Bird Johnson—but they have also begun to examine those women about whom relatively little is known.

The inaugural issue of the *Journal of First Ladies Studies* offers a case in point. Both articles we offer here take a fresh look at Mamie Eisenhower. When FLARE announced the creation of the journal last spring, and I issued a call for submissions, I had no idea we would be so fortunate as to receive two articles on Mrs. Eisenhower. These articles reflect a growing scholarly interest in mid-twentieth-century women's history and the development of the modern public role of presidential spouses.

Sharon Williams Leahy's contribution to this issue of the journal, "Housepower: Mamie Eisenhower's Hidden Hand Partnerships," explores Mrs. Eisenhower's collaborations with entrepreneurs and argues that these relationships helped to shape entire American industries. Of particular interest is Leahy's reassessment of the significance of "Mamie Pink," and her explanation of how the color became a defining feature of the 1950s. The article is part of her larger book project on Mamie Eisenhower.

Teri Finneman's article, "Making Mamie: How a Presidential Library Reinvented the Collective Memory of a First Lady," examines the 2018-2019 renovations at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Abilene, Kansas, which made the first lady a central character in its story. Finneman maintains that a more modern version of Mrs. Eisenhower has begun to take shape in the collective memory, and she argues that Mamie should no longer be viewed as "just" a housewife.

These two articles represent what, in my view, an academic journal should strive to publish: work that is grounded in deep research in the primary sources and which makes an original contribution to scholarship, furthering the field in the process.

The inaugural issue of the *Journal of First Ladies Studies* would not have seen the light of day without the help and support of the FLARE board, especially immediate-past president Nancy Kegan Smith and current president Diana B. Carlin. The American University School of Public Affairs, including Interim Dean Alison Jacknowitz and the Director of the First Ladies Initiative, Anita B. McBride, also deserve thanks for their support and confidence in the journal. Sheila Fox of TCS Software facilitated the final production of the journal.

Finally, I would like to thank a student at Keuka College, Ashly Dumbleton, who completed an internship—what Keuka calls Field Period—under my direction this past January. Ashly took a very rough template for the cover of the journal and used her immense skill in graphic design to create the beautiful cover you see for this issue. Ashly was also instrumental in completing more behind-the-scenes work to ensure our success.

We hope that you enjoy this inaugural issue of the journal and that you will support FLARE in its mission to create and sustain a network to promote and publicize research and education about the contributions, lives, impact, and lasting legacy of U.S. first ladies.

Christopher J. Leahy
Editor

Call for Submissions

The *Journal of First Ladies Studies* welcomes scholarly submissions based on original research on any aspect of the study of American first ladies, including work that examines them within a historical context, adopts a comparative perspective, presents a theoretical approach, or offers an interdisciplinary framework for analysis in fields such as history, women's studies, communication, sociology, political science, material culture, and historic preservation.

Inquiries about potential articles in the journal should be directed to the journal's editor, Christopher J. Leahy, Professor of History at Keuka College, at cleahy@keuka.edu.

Submission Guide:

Please submit article manuscripts by email, as a Microsoft Word-compatible attachment:

- Preferred manuscript length is 4,000 to 8,000 words, exclusive of endnotes
- Please use 12-point type for both text and notes.
- Double-space text and notes, with notes placed at the end of the manuscript text.
- Author's name and institutional affiliation should be placed on the title page only.
- Illustrations, photos, portraits, or figures in the public domain that enhance the article are welcome.
- Please follow the Chicago Manual of Style, 18th edition for the text of the article as well as the notes.
- Please include a working postal address, with telephone and email information for home or office.

The refereeing process for manuscripts is double blind. Referees are specialists most appropriate to each manuscript. We have no quotas of any kind with regard to authorship, topic, chronological period, or methodology; submissions determine what we publish. Authors must guarantee in writing that the work is original, that it contains no components produced by artificial intelligence, that it has not been previously published, and that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere in any form.

Housepower: Mamie Eisenhower's Hidden Hand Partnerships

Sharon Williams Leahy
Independent Scholar
HistoryInTwoVoices.com

On the chilly, overcast morning of Friday, February 13, 1953, some 700,000 New Yorkers obeyed their normal routine of dressing for work, brewing a hot cup of coffee, and listening for a half-hour to the popular, light-hearted "Breakfast with Dorothy & Dick" morning show on WOR-AM radio. The baritone-voiced actor/producer Richard Kollmar sat at the dining room table in the Park Avenue townhouse he shared with his wife, Dorothy Kilgallen, munching on toast and bantering with her about the city's theater scene, celebrity gossip, and headlines from the daily news. Dorothy was a famous newspaper columnist and reporter whom listeners knew as a regular contestant on the television game show *What's My Line.*[1]

Dorothy teased an exciting announcement she hoped would brighten the day for a sizeable portion of their audience: she had just received an official swatch of fabric from the Textile Color Card Association (TCCA), the organization that standardized color across the clothing industry. Since the country's newspapers had reported on what the new first lady, Mamie Eisenhower, had worn to the presidential inaugural ball three weeks earlier, Dorothy knew her female listeners would appreciate a bit of scoop that grainy black and white photos denied them—the *exact* color of Mrs. Eisenhower's gown. Dorothy gushed that the piece of silk

[1] For the weather forecast of that day, see: https://weatherspark.com/h/d/23912/1953/2/13/Historical-Weather-on-Friday-February-13-1953-in-New-York-City-New-York-United-States#metar-08-00; for setting the scene of the Kollmar and Kilgallen breakfast table, accessed June 30, 2025, see https://time.com/archive/6783711/radio-breakfast-at-kollmars1/.

fabric was “the most beautiful shade of pink” she had ever seen. She explained that Mrs. Eisenhower had authorized the TCCA to dye the fabric swatch to match her gown and call it

Image #1
Portrait of Mamie D. Eisenhower by Thomas E. Stephens, Oil on Canvas, 1959, Open source: Wikimedia Commons. Before the inauguration, Mrs. Eisenhower modeled her Nettie Rosenstein gown for the press, designed by Nettie’s sister-in-law Eva Rosencrans, at the Eisenhowers’ Morningside Drive home on the campus of Columbia University.

“First Lady Pink.” Dorothy declared that it was “just the shade” and predicted she would soon have a room in her own home painted in the magnificent color.[2]

Kilgallen's appreciation for "First Lady Pink" highlighted a prevalent challenge American women faced in the 1950s, namely, the difficulty of color matching various elements of their wardrobes. Mrs. Eisenhower's endorsement of the pink shade, commonly referred to as "Mamie Pink," provided an effective solution for coordinating wardrobe selections and allowed women to emulate the style of a prominent national figure. Mamie connected what *she* wore to the clothing choices of mostly white suburban middle-class women, which made her immensely popular.

There was more to it than that, however. Securing Mamie’s imprimatur was big business. The first lady of the United States collaborated with Margaret Hayden Rorke, managing director of the TCCA and a woman regarded as the “first lady of color,” to ensure that "Mamie Pink" set the standard for color in the 1950s. While scholars who study first ladies have recognized the delight women took in the pink shade and have acknowledged the color’s impact on the decade, they have neglected to ask *how* and *why* this occurred. More importantly, they have failed to attribute the phenomenon to the partnership between Mrs. Eisenhower and Rorke. The collaboration largely set the retail market for fashion during the 1950s and helped to shape consumer tastes in home design and housewares, contributing to what scholar Thomas Hine has called “one of history’s great shopping sprees.” The combined effort of the two women contributed to the consumer culture of post-World War II America and boosted the nation’s economic growth—an outcome historians usually overlook.[3]

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[2] “Heard on the Radio,” Summary of Dorothy & Dick Radio Show, February 13, 1953, Textile Color Card Association Files, Inter-Society Color Council Records Collection, Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware (hereafter Hagley Museum).

[3] Courtney Caudle Travers, “First Ladies as Trendsetters,” in *The Cambridge Companion to US First Ladies,* eds. Lisa M. Burns and Teri Finneman (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 255; Hine, quoted in Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Vintage Books, 2004), 293; see also Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); Richard M. Abrams, *America Transformed: Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change, 1941-2001* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 256. Abrams points out that shopping in the 1950s became a form of recreation, which represented a transition away from an activity undertaken to satisfy a subsistence need. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 2008), 157-164.

This unique partnership exhibited what first lady historians have often referred to as "agency," defined as "the power [of presidential spouses] to make decisions and choices to control their lives, within the social norms of their times and with their husbands' support." Mrs. Eisenhower exhibited profound self-possession and made decisions with an executive mindset. Contemporary reporters noted with approval that the first lady was "all business" when making decisions and described her accordingly as a "real executive." Moreover, her focus and discipline allowed her to employ what one prominent 1950s electrical trade association called "Housepower." That is, she effectively plugged her energy into multiple White House outlets, or activities, while simultaneously overseeing the Eisenhower familial domain. Naturally, this meant that she controlled the day-to-day domestic concerns of the mansion, as well as the formal and informal entertainment, orchestrating the arrangements for thirty-seven state dinners during her eight years as first lady. Formal entertainment like this would be tantamount to planning a large wedding celebration thirty-seven times – no small feat. Mrs. Eisenhower also managed the family finances during the White House years. So carefully did she oversee the household budget that her daughter-in-law Barbara recalled that one of Mamie's mantras was "we're not going to run it on the eagle," meaning the American taxpayers would not subsidize any personal Eisenhower expenditure. Mamie's appreciation for the value of a dollar kept her spending in check and forestalled possible negative comments in the press. Mamie commanded her domain. As she once memorably put it, in a statement that was literally true before she became first lady, and which serves as a metaphor for her tenure in the White House, "Ike fights the wars, I turn the lamb chops."[4]

Mamie's successful management of family finances during her husband's presidency reflected her executive abilities, though such accomplishments may not appear distinctive at first

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[4] Diana B. Carlin, Anita B. McBride, and Nancy Kegan Smith, *First Ladies: Making History and Leaving Legacies*, (Cognella, 2024), 6; Spokane (WA) *Spokesman Review*, October 29, 1952; *Enid* (OK) *Morning News*, October 18, 1952; *New York Times*, November 2, 1979; "Can Your Electric Wiring Bring You Full HOUSEPOWER for Modern Living?," National Electrical Contractors Association, *Better Homes and Gardens* (May 1956), 164; Interview with Barbara Eisenhower-Foltz, November 30, 2006, Oral History Archive, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas (hereafter DDEPL); *Buffalo Courier Express*, August 2, 1953.

glance, given that she was neither the first American woman nor the first first lady to oversee household budgets. What distinguished Mamie's approach, however, was her strategic use of "housepower," augmented as it was by the total support of President Eisenhower, which enabled her to build significant relationships with prominent women, including Margaret Hayden Rorke. Mamie demonstrated a keen aptitude for recognizing women whose potential and compelling backgrounds made them valuable collaborators. To accomplish her goals, Mrs. Eisenhower employed "hidden hand" methods comparable to the tactics her husband parlayed to such significant effect throughout his presidency. Through her pursuit of these partnerships, she contributed significantly to the role of first lady, which scholars have largely ignored. Her alliances with female entrepreneurs impacted various American industries. She was not merely a glorified housewife.[5]

Mrs. Eisenhower's distinctive contributions have often been overlooked because of the historical lens through which scholars have evaluated presidential spouses. They have framed their analysis around the perspective of the feminist movement, notably Betty Friedan's assertion that American middle-class women were constrained by societal expectations to serve as ideal wives and mothers, with their primary role defined as "housewife." In post-war America, homemaking and child rearing, along with supporting their husband's career ambitions, became the normative expectation, reducing opportunities for personal fulfillment outside the domestic sphere. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) contributed to the stigmatization of women such as Mamie Eisenhower who embraced traditional roles. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz has observed that Friedan's work significantly influenced historiography and that it has had a lingering effect. Scholars have followed Friedan's lead and have frequently undervalued Mrs. Eisenhower's influence as first lady, resulting in rankings such as "supportive spouse/model

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[5] Anthony R. Maravillas, "Overrated Pleasures and Underrated Treasures: Mamie Eisenhower, A Bridge Between First Lady Archetypes," in *A Companion To First Ladies*, ed. Katherine A.S. Sibley (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016) 496; Carlin, McBride and Smith, *First Ladies,* 104; It should be pointed out that more recent historians have questioned how much of President Eisenhower's activity as chief executive really reflected the "hidden hand." On this emerging historiography, see William I. Hitchcock. *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (Simon and Schuster, 2018). For the best example of the view that the "hidden hand" prevailed, see Jean Edward Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace* (Random House, 2012).

wife," that fail to reflect her full impact. A closer analysis of Mrs. Eisenhower's collaborations with female entrepreneurs reveals a first lady with considerable political sophistication and business savvy. The evidence challenges the limited labels— "housekeeper," "social hostess," and "partner-in-marriage"—often applied to her and offers the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of her tenure in the White House.[6]

Mamie herself contributed to historians' perceptions, making it difficult to imagine her in any other role. "I am perfectly satisfied to be known as a housewife," she stated, reinforcing the impression that the label pleased her. The contemporary press burnished this image by repeatedly commenting on her friendliness and connecting her naturally buoyant personality to an apparent comfort with traditional expectations of the first lady. "Mamie sparkles with a special kind of fizz," one paper effused. A journalist covering the White House described Mamie as skilled in self-effacement and as someone who consciously maintained a supporting position beside her popular husband. The press also referred to Mamie as the "First Homemaker of the Land." Even when Victor Lasky promised readers of his February 1953 article in *Today's Woman* that they would learn about "The Real Mamie Eisenhower," the focus remained on her domestic role at the executive mansion.[7]

To some extent, Mamie's affirmation of her domestic role was good Cold War politics. As historian Elaine Tyler May points out, openly challenging women's roles "would be seen as un-American" in the 1950s. The problem is that first lady scholars have largely accepted this portrayal of Mrs. Eisenhower at face value and while they have widened the lens overall in their study of first ladies, they have allowed this characterization to influence their assessments, even when offering novel categories of analysis. Take communication, for example. In her 1989 book,

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[6] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 50th Anniversary ed. (W. W. Norton, 2013), 5; Maravillas, "Overrated Pleasures and Underrated Treasures," 492; Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond The Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *Journal of American History* 79 (March 1993): 1455-1482, quote on p. 1456; Myra G. Gutin, *President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century*, (Greenwood Press, 1989), 7; Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing The Office of First Lady* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2000), 141-143.

[7] Toronto *Star Weekly*, February 21, 1953; *The Progressive Farmer*, December 1953 (DDEPL copy); Victor Lasky, "The Real Mamie Eisenhower," *Today's Woman* 27 (February 1953); *Grand Rapids* (MI) *Press*, February 18, 1952.

President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century, Myra G. Gutin proposed an innovative approach to evaluate the first ladies who had served in the role since women gained the right to vote in 1920 by scrutinizing their "communication activities." Included in these activities were making speeches, utilizing radio or television, providing interviews, holding press conferences, and drafting articles for magazines and newspapers. Gutin defined Florence Harding, Grace Coolidge, Bess Truman, and Mamie Eisenhower as "inactive public communicators" because they "gave no speeches, advocated no causes and campaigned for no candidate." This methodology sentenced Mrs. Eisenhower to the confining category of "White Housekeepers: Social Hostess and Ceremonial Presence," which reinforced the feminist-induced stereotype of a housewife, and undervalued her contributions, the most important of which fell outside of the realm Gutin established.[8]

Gutin is correct that Mamie gave no formal speeches. Long-time friends of Mrs. Eisenhower knew she was uncomfortable with public speaking, and most agreed she "would be no Eleanor Roosevelt." "I shan't make any speeches period," Mamie declared at one point shortly before becoming first lady. "I made a rule [to make no public pronouncements] in Washington [during the three-and-a-half years Ike served as Supreme Allied Commander], and I won't break it." Mamie wanted to avoid media attention that might boomerang on her and reflect badly on her husband. Her abstinence from speechmaking allowed all the focus to be on Ike's political messaging.[9]

That did not mean, however, that she failed to communicate. Indeed, Mamie became a master at finding other ways to make a point. One journalist observed that the first lady expressed her views by deploying "quick smiles, generous arm gestures, and outbursts like 'My Godfrey!'" Habitually using her hands when she talked, Mamie recognized how it could work to her advantage. For example, she did not believe in waving to crowds in a timid, self-conscious way. "Don't give them any of that prissy stuff," she advised her grandson's wife, Julie Nixon Eisenhower. "Give them a big wave—really say 'hello.'" Mamie came across as energetic, authentic, and down-to-earth. This won points with the press, especially with female members of the media. Inez Robb, a former war correspondent, confidently predicted early in Mamie's White

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[8] May, *Homeward Bound,* 203; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 13, 1952; Gutin, *President's Partner,* 2,7.

[9] *Tulsa Daily World*, August 24, 1952

House tenure that Mrs. Eisenhower "will continue to be herself," adding that "she is sweet, unspoiled, friendly and kind." Mamie also knew how to play to her audience. Robb recounted how during the presidential election campaign, Mamie lifted her dress a bit to reveal a "gay, pink petticoat" which a campaign supporter had embroidered with "I Like Ike" around the hem. The gesture delighted the assembled press. Robb described what she called the "Mamie-com" style this way: "Everyone after ten minutes in her presence, called her 'Mamie,'" even though she was "chic, beautifully groomed" and fresh as a "new dime." Put simply, people *liked* Mrs. Eisenhower and she put them at ease. She developed her own communication repertoire that resonated with the press and the American public, which made her an undeniable political asset to her popular husband. Combined with a determination to answer personally the correspondence that poured in during the presidential campaign and, later, into the White House mail room, Mamie exhibited her dedication to *team Eisenhower.* She also authored an article for *Good Housekeeping* during the 1952 campaign exhorting Americans to vote. There was more to political communication than formal speeches.[10]

Broadening their focus, scholars following Gutin have also nevertheless underestimated Mamie Eisenhower. Robert Watson, for example, argues that first ladies derive their "power and legitimacy through the president," and thus, their individual approach is largely "controlled" by their husbands. This view does not accord with Mamie's pursuit of partnerships. Watson developed classifications and asked "presidential scholars" to identify each first lady with one of five "partnership" categories. Mrs. Eisenhower's contributions were rated in the tepid fourth category, "Partner in Marriage." Like Gutin, Watson offers valuable analysis of American first ladies, yet he too falls short of charting Mamie Eisenhower's contributions to the role of first lady.[11]

Biographer Marilyn Irvin Holt attempted to rectify this undervaluation of Mrs.

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[10] *Tulsa Daily World*, August 24, 1952; *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, July 13, 1952: Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Mamie Eisenhower: The General's First Lady* (University Press of Kansas, 2007), 55; *Charlotte* (NC) *News*, September 26, 1952; *Boston Daily Globe*, June 15, 1952; *Tulsa Daily World*, August 24, 1952; *Good Housekeeping*, The Hearst Corp., November 1952, 13.

[11] Gutin, *President's Partner,* 31; Watson, *The Presidents' Wives,* 123.

Eisenhower. In her 2007 book, *Mamie Eisenhower: The General's First Lady*, Holt points out that Mamie won praise during her lifetime for her character and activities, but that she did not "translate well" after the women's movement, which "stressed total equality" at home and work. In the decades following the movement, Holt explains, Mamie was "dismissed" as another example of a woman pressured by a patriarchal society to stay at home. Holt reaches beyond this simplistic assessment, and she became the first scholar to indicate that Mamie used the "same hidden-hand approach" of handling situations that her husband has been credited with using. To illustrate her point, she details how Mamie extended a White House invitation to Lucille Ball and her husband, Desi Arnaz, shortly after red-baiter Joseph McCarthy had accused the actress of being a communist. The first lady refused to invite the Wisconsin senator and welcomed the Hollywood couple to the executive mansion, and by doing so, signaled that the Eisenhowers did not believe the accusations. The point of Mamie's non-invitation was to get her point across to McCarthy without confrontation. Holt explains that Mamie subtly "acted in partnership" with Ike for all "contentious matters," and her book lays the groundwork for an examination of Mamie's partnerships with women entrepreneurs.[12]

Mamie's conception of what partnerships entailed, and how to foster teamwork, began in 1916, at the age of nineteen, when she married Dwight D. Eisenhower, then a U.S. Army second lieutenant with limited financial means. Fully cognizant of the challenges she would face as her husband began to climb the ladder of career advancement, she demonstrated determination and adaptability and expressed a willingness to do her part, which largely meant developing the skills necessary for running an efficient household.

Overcoming adversity became central to this process. The Eisenhowers faced tragedy when their son, Doud Dwight ("Little Ikky"), died of scarlet fever at the age of three in 1921. Rather than succumb to the pressure of their heartbreaking loss, the couple emerged with an even stronger commitment to one another, which fostered an unbreakable partnership. Their second son, John, was born in 1922.

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[12] Marilyn Irvin Holt, "The Hidden-Hand Style of Mamie Eisenhower," *History New Network*, February 10, 2008, https://www.historynewsnetwork.org/article/the-hidden-hand-style-of-mamie-eisenhower.

Mamie Eisenhower remarked in a 1972 interview that the role of a wife was significant in her husband's life and that she approached her responsibilities without social ambitions but with confidence and commitment. The couple established clear divisions of labor early in their marriage that carried over into their time in the White House: Eisenhower managed official duties while Mamie oversaw domestic affairs. Mamie took pride in her contributions, emphasizing the importance of teamwork in their shared endeavors, particularly within the context of *their* Army career. An ethos was born, and it would fortify her for the partnerships she forged once she became first lady.[13]

Beyond her partnership with Ike, Mamie engaged with individuals, charities, and companies using the same commitment. She developed a methodical approach for determining whom to support, often collaborating with those who shared personal or professional affinities, including experiences related to military service or family loss.

Mamie's partnership with Margaret Hayden Rorke was the earliest "non-marriage" collaboration she formed. Rorke's TCCA, founded in 1915 as the "nationally recognized color authority for American industry," aimed to "overcome trade uncertainties and practice self-determination in color" for a variety of textile merchandise. The association produced the "Standard Color Card of America," complete with seasonal predictions for the American market and with two main goals in mind: enable customers to obtain a certain color across multiple manufacturing platforms and reduce waste at the manufacturing level. Many Americans were unaware of what the TCCA did, but the association performed a vital function. For example, the US military utilized the TCCA for the standardization of uniforms. Precedent even existed for working with first ladies. The association won approval from Lou Hoover and Eleanor Roosevelt to develop their signature colors. Neither of these first ladies were known then, or are today especially known, for wearing a certain color. Rorke was determined to change that with Mamie

[13] For biographical information on Mamie Eisenhower, see Holt, *Mamie Eisenhower* 3-5; Dorothy Brandon, *Mamie Doud Eisenhower: A Portrait of a First Lady*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 32; Mamie Eisenhower Oral History, 1972, DDEPL, 133, 149; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 13, 1952; *Grand Rapids Press*, February, 18, 1952; Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the President's Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961*, (William Morrow and Company, 1990), 556.

Eisenhower. On November 24, 1952, she wired a telegram to the soon-to-be first lady: "May we have the privilege of creating a color in your honor?"[14]

Mamie recognized that her reply to this telegram would have enormous consequences. Strongly leaning towards granting her approval to Rorke, she also knew that she needed to move carefully. Occupants of the White House do not *endorse* branded products. Of course, they use countless items in their daily lives. William Freeman noted in his book, *The Big Name*, that Mrs. Eisenhower went to "great lengths" to make sure she did not appear to be "endorsing" specific products. Perhaps the first lady ran Rorke's request by White House counsel, but she ultimately gave her permission to lend her name to the color; it was entirely her decision to do so. Together, she and Rorke made Mamie Eisenhower synonymous with the color pink; they ignited a decades-long economic boom for anything that came in Mamie's namesake hue: clothing, shoes, hats, makeup, paint, furniture, plastics, rubber, tile, automobiles, and more. For Rorke's part, Mrs. Eisenhower's answer to her question was important because over two thousand domestic and international TCCA manufacturing firms were waiting to capitalize on the novelty and produce goods in the new shade. "It's only good business for everybody to cooperate," Rorke explained to TCCA members. Every American manufacturer who produced goods in color knew Margaret Hayden Rorke. Some manufacturers went their own way when it came to color, she acknowledged, but she placed the decisions of those few errant manufacturers into perspective by pointing out that "nobody's Christianized the whole world yet!"[15]

Rorke was the daughter of successful theater producer Richard H. Hayden and Katherine E. Farson. Following her father's path, Margaret acted in venues across the United States and later married William H. Rorke, with whom she had four children. Active in women's suffrage,

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[14] Margaret Hayden Rorke (hereafter MHR) to Mamie Eisenhower (hereafter ME), November 24, 1952, Hagley Museum; Regina Lee Blaszczyk, "The Rise of Color Forecasting in the United States and Great Britain," in *The Fashion Forecasters: A Hidden History of Color and Trend Prediction,* ed. Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Ben Wubs (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 39; Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution*, (MIT Press, 2012), 71.

[15] Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Ben Wubs, "Beyond the Crystal Ball: The Rationale Behind Color and Trend Forecasting," in *The Fashion Forecasters,* ed. Blaszczyk and Wubs, 13; William M. Freeman, *The Big Name* (Printers Inc. Books, 1957), 165; *Clinton* (IL) *Daily Journal and Public*, August 22, 1953.

she founded the Catholic Committee of the Woman Suffrage Party and collaborated with leaders like Carrie Chapman Catt and Anna Howard Shaw as they campaigned for the right to vote. After her daughter Katherine died from childhood paralysis in 1916, Margaret channeled her energy into business, later stating that the tragedy spurred her career.[16]

During the thirty-five years Rorke served as managing director, the TCCA became the "most internationally famous organization of its kind in the world." Rorke established branch offices in Paris, London, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and Japan. She created and named "thousands of shades and colors" for the shoe, hosiery, glove, and millinery industries over the years. One of her projects involved the colors of the American flag. Rorke met with then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who asked her to head the committee to standardize the red, white, and blue. Put simply, popularizing pink for Mamie Eisenhower reflected nearly daily fare for Margaret Hayden Rorke.[17]

Rorke's main challenge after the 1952 election was not marketing pink but capturing Mamie Eisenhower's attention. Edith P. Mayo of the Smithsonian Institution noted that Mrs. Eisenhower had formalized the role of a female spouse in campaigns, becoming the first to follow a "script" on the hustings. Buried by incoming correspondence after Ike's victory, Mamie told reporter Gwen Gibson that her focus was solely on politics. Despite obstacles, Rorke persisted, following up her telegram of November 24 with another, as well as with phone calls in December. Mamie asked for more time, but pale pink emerged as the top choice for her Neiman Marcus inaugural ball gown. Rorke drafted an announcement for the TCCA, stating that Mrs. Eisenhower had endorsed "First Lady Pink" for her gown and had granted permission for its promotion. However, she did not—indeed, could not—make the announcement public yet.[18]

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[16] *New York Daily Herald*, November 23, 1879; Washington *Evening Star*, October 25, 1886; MHR, "Reminiscences," manuscript in possession of Patti Rorke, Cos Cog, CT.

[17] MHR, "Reminiscences."

[18] *New York Times*, November 17, 1996; *New York World Telegram and Sun*, August 31, 1952; MHR to ME, telegram, December 8, 1952, Hagley Museum; "Mamie Pink," Announcement, Textile Color Card Association draft announcement, n.d., Hagley Museum.

While Rorke had received permission from Mamie over the telephone in two separate calls to officially rename the color called "Renoir Pink" to the new "First Lady Pink," and distribute samples, she needed formal approval in writing. On January 16, Rorke again reached out to the first lady and suggested an announcement at Easter as a practical alternative date for the promotion, perhaps with a sample of the first lady's favorite shade of green. Ultimately, pink won the day. Mamie's secretary directed Nettie Rosenstein, the dress manufacturer, and Eva Rosencrans, Nettie's sister-in-law, who designed Mamie's ballgown, to send a swatch of the pink fabric to Rorke for distribution. But the following day, Mamie directed her secretary to send another note to Rorke expressing her concern that the Metropolitan Museum of Art would need to give permission to change the "Renoir Pink" name. Exasperated with the delay, Rorke dispatched a telegram the day before the inauguration to Kay Kerr, fashion promotions director at Neiman Marcus, explaining that "great urgency" demanded Kerr contact her to discuss a "very important matter."[19]

This very important "matter" was most likely revelations of leaked press reports describing Mrs. Eisenhower's dress (in the color – "Renoir Pink") six days before the inaugural ball. The publicity surrounding the first lady's choice of dress was a major story because heading into the new year, Mamie was voted one of the top twelve most fashionable women in the world, alongside such style icons as Wallis, the Duchess of Windsor, Marlene Deitrich, C.Z. Guest, and Babe Paley. Most people thought the color of the dress would be blue to match Mamie's large blue eyes. But a clue, revealed during the campaign, mentioned Mamie liked to decorate houses in her favorite colors: pink, yellow, and green. What concerned Rorke were the descriptions of the color of Mrs. Eisenhower's dress as "Renoir Pink." Rorke and Mamie had to figure out a way to salvage their special color promotion launch of "First Lady Pink."[20]

Despite being scooped by the press and missing the deadline to have the TCCA announcement revealed on inauguration day, Rorke pressed Mamie again for written permission.

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[19] MHR, "Notes," January 16, 1952; Mary Jane McCaffree to MHR, January 17, 1953; MHR to Kay Kerr, January 19, 1953, all in Hagley Museum.

[20] *Muncie* (IN) *Star*, January 12, 1953; *Logan* (OH) *Daily News*, December 26, 1952; "Biographical Facts About Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower," Republican National Committee, August 1952, DDEPL.

Finally, she received a telegram stating, “Mrs. Eisenhower would be pleased if the pink used in her ball gown was called ‘First Lady Pink.’” After Mamie’s notification, the TCCA managing director went to work, converting the color nomenclature from “Renoir Pink” to “First Lady Pink.” It is hard to imagine how such a thing could be accomplished prior to the internet and email, but the multiple layers of conventional communication were highly efficient after World War II and Rorke knew how to push all the right buttons.[21]

Rorke spared no expense in announcing her triumph. Nine days after President Eisenhower’s inauguration, she created the TCCA announcement and paired it with a special fabric covered booklet, which looked more like a royal invitation than an industry color card. The 7.5 x 10.75-inch card was covered in gold embossed fabric with the inside flaps wrapped in gold foil paper and a cord and tassel attached to the spine. Inside was the title page and on it, written in expressive calligraphy, were the words “First Lady Pink.” The second page states that the color was “named in honor of Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower and presented to her by The Textile Color Card Association of the United States, Inc., 1953.” Opposite the second page was a four inch by three-inch swatch of silk fabric dyed in the soft pink color. However, due to the delay, it was not until early February before TCCA industry members received the special color update.[22]

Within a few days of receiving the announcement, TCCA members published their own bulletins to their respective retailers and suppliers, which caused an immediate chain reaction in the retail sector. Millinery Promotions Inc., for example, sent urgent directions to its manufacturing clients: “1.) Rush into dye ‘First Lady Pink’ in your favorite materials, 2.) Rush into work showroom samples in the new ‘First Lady Pink’ color, 3.) Plan special ‘First Lady Pink’ open-to-buy, advertising and window displays, in excess of your present budgets, and this color promotion will bring you extra consumer traffic and sales.” Additionally, the directions made clear that “First Lady Pink” would be nationally promoted by “Press, Magazines, TV, and Radio.”[23]

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[21] Mary Jane McCaffree to MHR, January 27, 1953, telegram, Hagley Museum.

[22] Textile Color Card Association Presents “First Lady Pink” booklet, Hagley Museum.

[23] Millinery Promotions Inc, February 1953 Release, Hagley Museum.

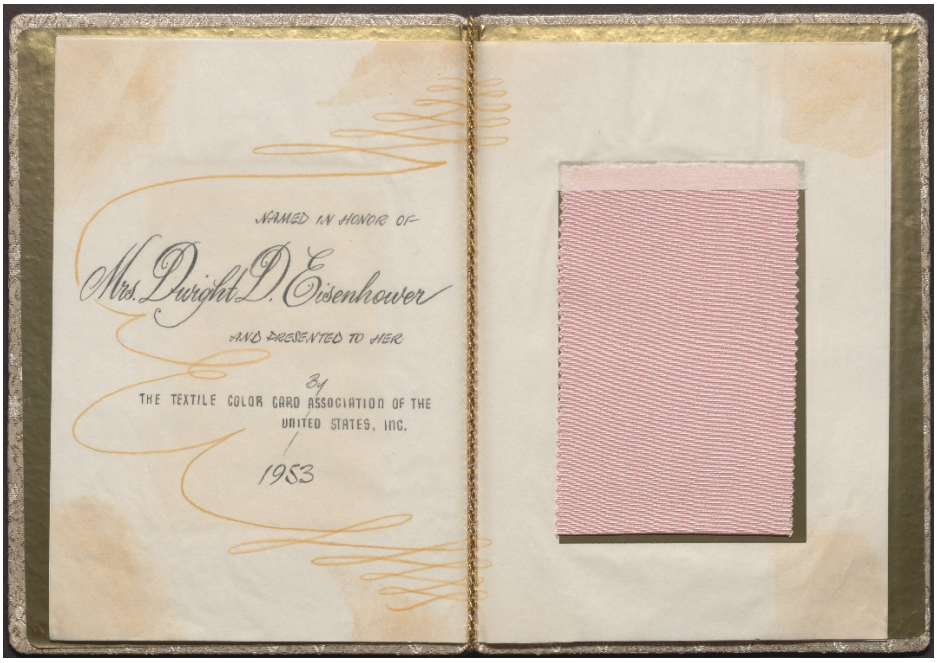

Image #2a & 2b
First Lady Pink, Color Card, 1953, Courtesy: Hagley Museum, Wilmington, DE.
Margaret Hayden Rorke, Managing Director of the Textile Color Card Association of the United States, created this color card and forwarded it to thousands of TCCA members. Within days of its release, stores were selling many items in "First Lady Pink."

Rorke sent out "First Lady Pink" color cards and announcements to fashion reporters nationwide. By early February, stores across the United States were promoting hats, gloves, scarves, blouses, fabric, and accessories in "First Lady Pink." The color quickly became a trend, replacing navy-blue for Easter in some areas and appearing in products from denim to pearls. Canadian shoppers were also alerted to the pink craze. Dorothy Kilgallen made headlines by wearing a "First Lady Pink" hat and matching gloves with her navy-blue suit. Numerous ads and articles spread the message to people: buy something pink.[24]

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[24] *Asheville* (NC) *Citizen-Times*, February 8, 1953; *Poughkeepsie* (NY) *Journal*, February 19, 1953; *Ogden* (UT) *Standard-Examiner*, April 10, 1953; *Springfield* (MA) *Morning Union*, April 3, 1953; Advertisement: The Crescent, *Spokane Spokesman-Review*, June 26, 1953; *Macon* (GA) *News*, February 19, 1953; Vancouver (BC) *Province*, February 24, 1953; *Madison* (WI) *Capital Times*, March 26, 1953.

And buy they did. Following strong promotions by Rorke and the first lady, pink rapidly became a *major* trend across manufacturing sectors. In 1954, industry reports noted the surge in pastel pink furnishings, with pink becoming especially popular for home appliances such as refrigerators, dishwashers, and stoves. Retailers like Shainberg's highlighted the widespread appeal of pink, offering matching accessories for women and clothing for men, while advertising slogans from other retailers encouraged customers to embrace the color. By the late 1950s, pink had been established in bathrooms and kitchens and had even influenced new housing trends. It was not a total triumph, however: some male consumers expressed concern about the growing presence of pink in traditionally masculine domains like automobiles and garages.[25]

Mamie Eisenhower and Margaret Hayden Rorke collaborated to establish a significant cultural movement; "First Lady Pink" gained widespread popularity. The two women demonstrated exceptional synergy, with both exhibiting decisive leadership, commitment to deadlines, and a shared appreciation for color and fashion. Both had been raised in an upper-middle-class environment and enjoyed strong familial support. Rorke's three sons served in the U.S. Army during World War II: James as an officer; Hayden as an assistant stage manager of Irving Berlin's *This Is the Army*—an all-soldier Broadway revue that toured nationally and internationally (Hayden later played "Dr. Bellows" in the TV sitcom, *I Dream of Jeannie)*; and Edward, who earned the Silver Star for gallantry in action, and survived both captivity in Japanese POW camps and the Bataan Death March.[26]

The partnership between Mamie and Margaret resulted in the introduction of America's most prominent bespoke color. Rorke contributed her extensive expertise in color standardization, while Mamie's choices regarding color and nomenclature underscored the significance of the first lady's role. Their collaboration sustained the popularity of "First Lady Pink" well beyond initial projections. When asked about the public's enthusiastic response to the

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[25] *Detroit Free Press*, March 7, 1954; *Buffalo News*, July 6, 1954; New Madrid (MO) *Weekly Record*, March 4, 1955; *Pittsburgh Press*, March 9, 1955; *Jersey Journal*, June 24, 1955*; Muncie* (IN) *Evening Press*, November 30, 1954; *Ann Arbor News*, October 11, 1957; *Bristol* (PA) *Daily Courier*, February 11, 1960; *Dayton* (OH) *Daily News*, November 19, 1954.

[26] *Forth Worth Star-Telegram*, October 8, 1945; *Casper Star Tribune*, Casper Wyoming, April 16, 1992, August 17, 1980.

color, Margaret remarked with understated satisfaction that "It's going over better than Eleanor [Roosevelt] Blue."[27]

After President Eisenhower's re-election, Mamie skillfully managed public relations, further supporting her husband's administration. She was well liked, with staff noting her "endearing quality" that aided his election success. Mamie made visitors feel at home, treating everyone like family and easing their nerves—qualities praised by figures such as Mabel McKay, who described Mrs. Eisenhower as welcoming and personable.[28]

As we have seen, Mamie excelled at organizing large gatherings, ensuring that every White House function was carefully planned. When Britain's Queen Mother Elizabeth visited Washington in 1954, the first lady consulted longtime White House seamstress Lillian Rogers Parks to make sure this visit differed in every way from her previous one in 1939. The two women found old records that enabled Mamie to avoid serving the same food. The Queen Mother was familiar with the Eisenhowers from World War II, having hosted them at Balmoral Castle in 1946 for a weekend of dinners and dancing. During their trip to the UK, the National Trust of Scotland invited the Eisenhowers to stay at Culzean Castle, where the top floor had been reserved for Ike in honor of his leadership during the war.[29]

In 1957, Ike and Mamie hosted another royal visit from Great Britain, welcoming Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip to the White House. Traditionally, President and Mrs. Eisenhower expressed their gratitude personally to visiting heads of state, particularly when longstanding family connections were involved. Following the departure of Queen Elizabeth's mother from Washington in 1954, the Eisenhowers presented her with a custom "Crown Cup," engraved with

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[27] Hayden Rorke biography, accessed August 7, 2025, https://www.haydenrorke.com/about; *Casper* (WY) *Star-Tribune*, April 16, 1992; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, October 8, 1945; *Clinton* (IL) *Daily Journal and Public*, August 22, 1953.

[28] Lillian Rogers Parks, in collaboration with Frances Spatz Leighton, *My Thirty Years Backstairs at the White House*, (Ishi Press International, 2008), 321; Eileen Hadley Givens, *I Baked a Cake for Ike and Mamie! A Memoir of Douglas and Mabel McKay: Letters from Washington, D.C* (Burbank Printing, 2014), 73.

[29] Passaic (NJ) *Herald News*, October 21, 1954; Parks with Leighton, *My Thirty Years Backstairs,* 96; *Bridgeport* (CT) *Telegram*, November 5, 1954.

the British coat of arms, crafted by Steuben Glass of Corning, New York. For Queen Elizabeth II's inaugural visit to the United States, Mamie sought a distinctive gift and selected the Boehm Porcelain studio for the task. By collaborating with Helen and Edward Marshall Boehm, Mrs. Eisenhower offered their fledgling New Jersey factory with international recognition that was previously enjoyed only by Asian and European porcelain manufacturers. As a result, the United States is now acknowledged as a world leader in the production of exceptional examples of fine porcelain art.[30]

The royal couple's visit to Washington on October 17, 1957, coincided with the three hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the colonial settlement of Jamestown. The Eisenhowers had not seen Elizabeth since their 1946 trip to Scotland, two months before Elizabeth's engagement to Philip Mountbatten. Much had changed for Elizabeth since then. Her coronation took place on June 6, 1953, and five years later, the beautiful thirty-one-year-old sovereign and her attractive husband were parents of two children: Prince Charles and Princess Anne. News of the Queen's imminent visit to the United States appeared in newspapers during the first week of August 1957. White House press secretary James C. Hagerty announced that the President had "extended a personal invitation several weeks ago and it was accepted formally yesterday by Her Majesty."[31]

Helen Boehm saw the forthcoming royal visit as an opportunity to promote her and her husband's newly established porcelain art company, which was then America's sole hard-paste porcelain manufacturer. Aware that the Eisenhowers would present a state gift during the Queen's visit, Helen recalled Prince Philip's interest in polo and proposed that her husband sculpt a likeness of the prince engaged in the sport, which would serve simultaneously as an ideal gift and publicity for their enterprise. In her autobiography, *With a Little Luck: An American Odyssey*, Helen described her initiative-taking approach to such opportunities. She promptly sent a letter to Mrs. Eisenhower outlining her proposal. The first lady responded positively but requested a preliminary sketch of the intended porcelain statue. Ed Boehm diligently worked through the night to refine the concept and dispatched the sketch to the White House. One month

[30] London *Daily Telegraph*, November 8, 1954; New York *Daily News*, June 12, 1989.

[31] *Hackensack Record*, August 6, 1957.

later, he received permission from the White House to proceed on the project and was allotted four months to complete the sculpture.[32]

Edward Boehm was a focused, eccentric artistic genius who preferred animals to people. Helen met Ed at an Air Force center in New York while visiting her ill brother. She became intrigued when she saw Ed instructing soldiers in clay modeling, and she learned that he ran the animal rehabilitation program at the center. As Helen watched him skillfully sculpt a mare and foal, she immediately knew she wanted to marry him.[33]

A decisive woman, twenty-four-year-old Helen Franzolin married Edward Boehm three months after their first meeting. The couple moved in with her mother in Brooklyn. Almost immediately, Helen learned she would have to share her husband—with animals. After the war ended, Ed worked as a veterinary assistant and often brought home animals in need of a home or special care. With Helen's encouragement, her husband continued to work on his art, drawing and sculpting the animals and birds he loved. During their first years as a married couple, Helen became the first woman in New York licensed as a dispensing optician, ultimately obtaining a position at the prestigious Meyrowitz Opticians on Fifth Avenue, the "leading international optical center." Helen learned all the aspects of the business, especially salesmanship. She knew her employment would give her the opportunity to meet influential people, and her salary helped fund the couple's dream of Ed becoming a full-time artist. In those early years, Ed tried to push his artist ambitions aside, but Helen "kept bringing his dream to the fore," reminding him that it "was *his* future." Ultimately, Ed decided that he would pursue his art through the medium of hard-paste porcelain. Hard-paste porcelain allowed the artist to get as true to life in color as well as "form in the natural world." As Reese Palley observed in his book, *The Porcelain Art of Edward Marshall Boehm*, Ed's choice of medium was "both daring and arrogant." "No American," Palley explained, "had ever really conquered hard-paste sculpture," up to that time.[34]

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[32] Helen Boehm with Nancy Dunn, *With A Little Luck: An American Odyssey* (Rawson Associates, 1985), 87.

[33] Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck,* 18-20.

[34] Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck,* 26, 30-31, 41; Reese Palley, *The Porcelain Art of Edward Marshall Boehm* (Harrison House, 1988), 21.

Composed of a mixture of special clays and minerals and fired at extremely high temperatures, porcelain was invented in China over one thousand years ago. It was not until the eighteenth-century, however, when European pottery manufacturers learned the secret to producing fine hard-paste porcelain. This became the backbone of the porcelain market until 1950, when the Boehms opened a small basement factory in Trenton, New Jersey. Ed's temperament ensured that he "could never have been an entrepreneur," Palley explained, but he "took quantum leaps" with his art. Initial experiments creating the kind of porcelain art Ed conceived were tricky and costly. Helen stayed the course and understood that they both had their talents, Ed with his animals and art and she with her head for business. She had no doubt that the "energy we could create as a *team* working toward the same goal" was the key.[35]

Helen was correct. Ed mastered hard-paste porcelain, and together they made a formidable team. Though initial sales of Ed's horse, bull, and dog figurines were slow, Helen sought publicity by contacting Vincent Andrus at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Pressing her claim that Ed was America's only hard-paste porcelain maker, she persuaded Andrus to visit, and he ended up buying two figurines for the museum's collections. Helen then secured an in-depth story in the *New York Times* on January 20, 1951, which helped Boehm porcelain gain traction in stores; the publicity gradually grew their business.[36]

Helen acknowledged her husband's lack of interest in financial matters; after their marriage he no longer managed tasks such as writing checks. She took charge of overseeing both household and business finances, as Mamie Eisenhower had done early in *her* marriage. Operating within a modest budget motivated Helen to seek innovative strategies for promoting Ed's work. Reasoning that if the Metropolitan Museum valued Boehm pieces, she thought the White House might also be interested, especially considering that the Eisenhower farm in Gettysburg was home to several beef cattle. In February 1954, Helen mailed a letter to the White House highlighting the Met's acquisition of the two porcelain figurines and inquiring whether the Eisenhowers would accept a gift of a porcelain Hereford bull. Her interest piqued, Mamie replied directly and invited Helen to join her for lunch.[37]

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[35] Palley, *The Porcelain Art,* 23, 29; Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck,* 41.

[36] Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck,* 43.

[37] Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck,* 68.

On the appointed day, Mamie directed the White House staff to arrange a small table in the Red Room for the luncheon with Mrs. Boehm. The setting featured oil-on-canvas portraits of former presidents and first ladies, displayed on crimson fabric walls. Helen was suitably impressed by the atmosphere, referring to the lunch as an "hour of magic." Demonstrating her customary graciousness, Mamie ensured that Helen felt comfortable during their meal of consommé and roast chicken tarragon, while they discussed porcelain craftsmanship and the history of the Boehm factory. Mamie no doubt appreciated the collaborative efforts of the Boehms and noted Helen's unwavering support of her husband's artistic pursuits. Ed Boehm's service in the Army Air Force during World War II also struck a chord.[38]

During lunch, President Eisenhower entered the room, at which point Helen presented him with the Boehm Hereford Bull. Mamie observed Ike's response closely, understanding its significance in determining future collaboration with Helen Boehm. The president clearly liked the piece, expressing admiration for Ed Boehm's artistry and congratulating Helen on the work. Ultimately, Mrs. Eisenhower accepted the piece for the White House collection.[39]

After Mamie commissioned the Boehms to produce the state gift for Queen Elizabeth, a determined Ed worked to exceed expectations. His preliminary sketches for the polo sculpture reflected his innovative approach to design. The concept was ambitious: both rider and horse would be cast in a dynamic pose, aiming to strike the ball toward a goal post. The initial construction involved 268 interlocking parts, which were later consolidated into twenty-five principal moulds. Once formed and assembled, these moulds were fired in a 2,500-degree (Fahrenheit) kiln, cooled, and subsequently painted to complete the piece. The finished sculpture was mounted on a double-tiered polished wood base, with a plaque bearing Her Majesty's Royal Coat of Arms alongside the US Presidential Seal, and it measured just over sixteen and one-half inches in height. Mamie directed Boehm to include an inscription between the two seals: "To Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness the Prince Philip, October 1957, from President and Mrs. Eisenhower." For safe delivery, the Boehms packed the sculpture in popcorn rather than Styrofoam, and Helen delivered it personally to the White House. When the first lady

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[38] Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck*, 70-71.

[39] Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck,* 70-71.

asked about the invoice, Helen noted the honor the Eisenhowers had bestowed upon the Boehm studio and told Mamie she would accept the nominal fee of $1.00.[40]

Image #3
Edward Marshall Boehm, Polo Porcelain Sculpture, gift from President and Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower to Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip on their trip to the United States in October 1957. Courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library.

[40] Edward M. Boehm sketches of Polo Sculpture; Helen F. Boehm to Mary Jane McCaffree, September 13, 1957, both in "England Visit of Queen" file, DDEPL; *Trenton Times*, October 20, 1957.

President Eisenhower presented the gift to the royal couple on the evening of October 18, 1957. Early the next morning Ed and Helen were awakened by a friend who saw the picture of "Ed's Polo Player" on the front page of the *New York Times*—above the fold! Helen jumped for joy and shouted, "like someone who has just won the state lottery." Two days later, Helen showed the only replica that the studio had created of the "Polo Player" on NBC's *Today Show*. That morning, the name of Edward Marshall Boehm was broadcast into millions of homes.[41]

Gambling on an unknown porcelain art manufacturer to produce a sculpture of high quality in a limited amount of time illustrates Mamie Eisenhower's impeccable ability to evaluate people and recognize their talents. The hour she spent in the company of Helen Boehm at lunch in 1954, as well as Ike's response to the presentation of the bull figurine, provided Mamie with everything she needed to know to authorize the Boehms for their studio's most important commission ever. Mamie's decision led to more presidential commissions for Boehm porcelain. In 1958, the Eisenhowers traveled to Canada, taking with them a sculpture of Canadian geese as a gift. A "Presidential Eagle" was later made for John F. Kennedy. In 1969, President Richard Nixon asked the Boehm studio to create the stunning "Mute Swans – Birds of Peace" sculpture that he presented as a gift from the people of the United States to the People's Republic of China. Ed Boehm died suddenly from a heart attack on January 29, 1969, age fifty-five, but his partner-in-marriage continued to grow his art and legacy into a $10 million dollar-a-year business by 1985. More importantly, Mamie Eisenhower quietly put the world on notice that the United States boasted one of the most significant porcelain art manufacturers in the world. As Reese Palley has pointed out, "No one can ever again judge the accomplishments of porcelain sculptors other than by comparing their work" with that of Edward Marshall Boehm.[42]

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[41] Boehm and Dunn, *With a Little Luck,* 88.

[42] *Jackson* (TN) *Sun*, June 22, 1977; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 5, 1973; Palley, *The Porcelain Art,* 9.

Image #4
Helen Boehm and Mamie Eisenhower at the Kennedy Center, 1973. Official ribbon cutting at Kennedy Center Delchamps-Lombardo Collection of Boehm Porcelain in the Eisenhower Theatre South Reception room. Mrs. Eisenhower officiated at the ribbon cutting ceremonies. Courtesy of the Museum of American Porcelain.

Mrs. Eisenhower often declined offers from artists, designers, and manufacturers to produce products for the first couple, as evidenced by thousands of documents at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library. She exercised her right of first refusal regularly, personally turning down offers such as a Russeks dress for her 1953 inaugural gown. When Judson Rees proposed presenting her with a designer gown at a fundraiser, she rejected the idea due to concerns about commercialism, emphasizing that her purchases were private. Oleg Cassini, who was savvy enough to highlight his military service when he approached Mamie, offered to design the gown for her second inaugural. He was thanked and told that his reputation merited consideration, but no commitment was made, and Mamie ultimately looked elsewhere. That

decision can only be understood within the context of yet another partnership between the first lady and a female entrepreneur.[43]

Mamie Eisenhower's most enduring partnership outside of her marriage was with fashion designer Mollie Parnis. When a bouquet of flowers stained Mamie's new dress at the Republican National Convention in Chicago in 1952, she attempted to clean it and damaged the garment. She quickly wrote a letter to Parnis seeking advice. While the fate of the dress remains unknown, we do know that Parnis responded to Mamie's entreaties, which sparked their long-lasting collaboration.[44]

As soon as General Eisenhower announced he would run for president in 1952, the press pounced on every move Ike and Mamie made. Reporters found it remarkable that despite living in Paris, Mamie preferred budget-friendly American-made dresses to foreign frocks. At one point, Dorothy Kilgallen observed in her "Voice of Broadway" daily column that a certain clothing designer was hoping there would not be an upset in the presidential race, since the leading candidates' wives, including Mamie, were wearing Mollie Parnis. "The dress Mamie Eisenhower wore when she arrived in Chicago for Ike's big moment was a Parnis creation," Kilgallen confirmed. During the campaign, newspaper photographers followed Mamie around Washington D.C. as she shopped for new clothing. A UPI photographer snapped a picture of her as she considered a new hat at Garfinkel's department store. While there, Mamie also tried on "thirty dresses" before she settled on three, all constructed of quality materials and designed in an ultra-feminine silhouette, which appealed to Mamie. As it turned out, Parnis had designed all three dresses. On a return trip to New York, Mamie shopped at Bonwit Tellers and purchased two more dresses—both again Mollie Parnis creations. Prior to the Republican Convention, Mamie had never formally met the designer. The aforementioned letter Mamie penned on July 29, after Ike secured the nomination for president, was the advent of the Mamie- Mollie partnership. In retrospect, it seems rather extraordinary for Mamie to have reached out to the head of a wholesale clothing manufacturing firm because of a small stain on a dress. She could just as

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[43] David Nemeror to ME, December 8, 1952 (Cross Reference Sheet); Judson M. Rees to Mary Jane McCaffree, April 13, 1956 (Cross Reference Sheet); Oleg Cassini to ME, November 16, 1956; notepaper typed info on Oleg Cassini, n.d.; ME to Oleg Cassini, November 28, 1956, all in Mamie D. Eisenhower Papers, 1896-1979, DDEPL.

[44] ME to Mollie Parnis, July 29, 1952, Mamie D. Eisenhower Papers, 1896-1979, DDEPL.

easily have contacted the store from which she purchased the garment. This seemingly innocuous outreach was Mamie's "hidden hand" way of opening the lines of communication between the two women.[45]

Mamie naturally wanted to look her best for the upcoming presidential campaign. She appreciated good clothing and saved her garments for years. As White House seamstress Lillian Rogers Parks observed, Mamie collected clothes as others collected "demitasse cups or paintings." Mamie spurned dresses that made her look "old." She did not feel fifty-six-years-of-age, and she wanted to convey her youthful optimism. Her figure allowed her to carry it off. As the Passaic, NJ *Herald News* city editor, Arthur G. McMahon, reported, "Mrs. Eisenhower weighs 138 pounds, wears a size 6 glove, and a size 14 dress" (approximately size 6/8 in today's sizing). With the lower half of her physique slightly larger than the upper half, Mamie was an "early convert" to the post-war "New Look," introduced in 1947 by French couturier, Christian Dior. The silhouette required a "full skirt, nipped waistlines, and sloping shoulders" In her book, *As Seen On TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, Karal Marling asserted that the design values of the "New Look" "exuded a palpable optimism," and pointed out that clothing mainly operates as a person's outward "autobiography made manifest." Mrs. Eisenhower, Marling noted, was a "passionate but prudent devotee" of the "New Look" throughout the decade.[46]

The slim-waisted, full-skirt dress style was indeed the favorite silhouette of Mrs. Eisenhower. Reporters learned she was "more of a dress than suit woman." As Mamie explained, "I always stick to the conservative," and in the 1950s, such dresses were conservative. If there was a designer in the United States suited to Mamie's aesthetic, it was Mollie Parnis. Fashion editor Henriette Lowe expressed relief when she reviewed Parnis's Fall 1952 collection: "This designer, bless her, has remained true to the full skirt because, she said, women will never discard such a becoming style." Her clothes, Lowe claimed, were "perky and youthful and priced within reach," just the sort of style Mamie loved. Besides finding that Parnis's dresses fit the

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[45] *Washington Times Herald*, July 10, 1952; *Toronto Star*, June 28, 1952.

[46] Parks and Leighton, *My Thirty Years Backstage,* 49, 51; Passaic *Herald News*, September 25, 1952; Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen On TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*, (Harvard University Press, 1994), 9-11, 19.

bill, the soon-to-be-first lady also no doubt appreciated that Mollie and her husband, Leon Livingston, were partners in business as well as in life. Together the husband and wife team created the Parnis-Livingston wholesale clothing manufacturing company located on Seventh Avenue in New York City.[47]

There was also Parnis's military connection. One of the most important accomplishments of her early dress-making business was designing the uniform for the new United States Cadet Nurses Corp (CNC). She created a "handsome gray outfit with red epaulets." The uniforms "reveal[ed] her faith in simple, well-tailored lines." Her design helped to bring national attention to Parnis's clothing manufacturing business. Seemingly overnight, Mollie became "one of our leading American designers," with fashion editors heralding her "sense of line and proportion." Fashion editors courted Parnis for her advice on how to dress American women. For women with petite figures like Mrs. Eisenhower, the designer advised wearing "shirtwaist dresses and blouses with V-necklines." She was sensitive to the self-criticism most women had about their figures, but she reasoned, there was no reason to despair since "most common figure faults…could be easily corrected."[48]

Cultivating a relationship with Mollie Parnis during the 1952 presidential campaign was a shrewd tactic by Mamie. Once Parnis proffered advice for her wardrobe, descriptions of Mamie in the newspapers included "chic," and "au courant as a new dime." The press ultimately bestowed upon Parnis the label of the "first lady's favorite designer." When interviewed, Parnis frequently described her VIP client as a typical American woman: "she is so normal." Complimenting Mrs. Eisenhower on her process of carefully selecting clothes for the campaign, Parnis asserted that it would lay the foundation for an "excellent White House wardrobe." Buzz for Mamie as "Best Dressed First Lady" began soon after election day, echoed by her new partner-in-fashion: "Mrs. Eisenhower is going to be a designer's dream in the White House," Parnis declared. Aware of the volume of print articles, and radio and television spots highlighting the first lady's clothing, Parnis predicted that "women will be wearing purple, green, dull blue and black, especially black that sets off nice accessories." These colors happened to be the colors

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[47] Harrisburg *Evening News*, June 14, 1952; *El Paso Herald Post*, June 30, 1952.

[48] *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 17, 1944; Louisville *Courier Journal*, November 17, 1944.

of the Parnis dresses Mamie just purchased. To forestall criticism that she was being self-serving, the designer justified her forecast by adding, "those are Mrs. Eisenhower's favorite colors."[49]

The one thing Parnis sought to *prevent* Mamie from doing was cutting costs for her wardrobe. Mamie told reporters she would "go easy" on Ike's wallet and wear last year's clothes in the fall of 1953. Dorothy Kilgallen reported that the first lady's decision "gave the nation's garment manufacturers chills and fever when she announced" it. Thrift, as noted above, was part of Mamie's character. She proudly declared that she was so frugal she could make "the eagle scream." To everyone's relief, the first lady continued to add to her wardrobe at a promising pace. *Women' Wear Daily* predicted a "rosy future" because of Mrs. Eisenhower's "real influence" on the world of fashion. In 1952, the fashion industry represented $11 billion in gross revenue. What manufacturers appreciated was how the first lady could be counted on to drive multiple fashion revenue streams. Mamie had the power to connect her personalized "New Look" style dresses with sales for earrings, necklaces, pins, stoles, scarves, handbags, and hats. Many Parnis dress designs had bracelet-length sleeves, perfect for adorning one's wrist and showing off color-coordinated gloves. Moreover, Parnis designed dresses to sit thirteen inches from the floor, Mamie's preferred hemline, which left room for admiration of hosiery and shoes. According to the fashion editor for the Associated Press, Dorothy Roe, "business is popping" on Seventh Avenue, referring to the Parnis-Livingston clothing enterprise. "Optimism," Roe reported, was "apparent among manufacturers," and the financial data revealed a "solid increase" in sales throughout the nation. The first lady, in Roe's opinion, was that "rare phenomenon, a grandmother who looks wonderful in a strapless dress." Mamie's look appealed to a broad customer base.[50]

Mamie's influence on the fashion industry cannot be overstated. One of the most powerful women establishing the United States as a dominant world leader in fashion was Eleanor Lambert. A fashion publicist, Lambert was the founder of New York Fashion Week.

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[49] *Tulsa Daily World*, August 24, 1952; *Atlanta Journal*, May 15, 1953; *Columbus* (OH) *Ledger*, November 6, 1952.

[50] *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, September 23, 1953; Maravillas, "Overrated Pleasures and Underrated Treasures," 493; *Muskogee* (OK) *Daily Phoenix and Times Democrat*, September 15, 1953; *Modesto Bee*, December 8, 1952; Yonkers *Herald Statesman*, November 21, 1952.

When the time came for the New York Dress Institute's semi-annual fashion event at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, Lambert made sure that the two hundred fashion-editor attendees knew Mamie Eisenhower was a major force of the fashion business boom. When entering the event hall, a "huge, blown-up photographic likeness" of Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower hung over the rafters, leaving no doubt as to who boasted the "strongest style persuasion" for American women. Personally aware of how the fashion industry contributed to America's production output, Mamie sent a personal message to the style editors: "As a soldier's wife I learned early in life that pride in personal appearance is not a superficial thing. It rates high on every officer's efficiency report, and his family (herself included) is part of that report." Mamie went on to describe how army wives "have fewer dresses than her husband has uniforms." Her long-held view that "knowing more about clothes helps women as much as it interests them," was a message that fortified the fashion industry. By actively reaching out with a message of support, the first lady demonstrated that she was an "ardent believer" in the importance of good style and looks, and she recognized that both were essential to morale.[51]

Parnis's dress designs helped Mamie stay relevant as a style influencer, and their relationship strengthened over time. The designer installed a special phone on her desk at her Seventh Avenue office so Mamie could call her whenever she pleased. A familiar refrain, Parnis once disclosed, was hearing her switchboard operator say: "Miss Parnis, it's the White House—again!" Mamie placed many of the calls herself, but sometimes, Parnis explained, it was Mamie's secretary, Mary Jane McCaffree, who sent out an "SOS" for something. Whatever Mamie needed, Parnis was equal to the emergency. She appreciated the first lady's confidence in her clothing line, noting wryly that "she believes in the two-party system for fashion."[52]

At one point, their partnership could have faltered. On February 28, 1955, McCaffree wrote a letter to Parnis expressing concern that "Elizabeth Arden is showing the green dress." She explained that it was the exact same green dress already chosen by Mrs. Eisenhower, and she "hoped there will be no repercussions." With so many women patronizing Arden's store in Washington D.C., McCaffree feared that one of them would show up at the March 30 Senate

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[51] *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 12, 1953.

[52] *Atlanta Journal*, May 15, 1953; Madison *Wisconsin State Journal*, January 7, 1953.

wives' tea in the same dress, and she would "hate to see Mrs. Eisenhower embarrassed." As a clothing wholesaler, Parnis sold her dresses all across the country, but usually she customized the dresses for the first lady—except this time.[53]

The dress in question was identified as Parnis model #448, a shirt-waist dress in silk taffeta with small, emerald-green leaves organized in a densely scattered pattern and printed on an electric blue background; the striking color made it memorable. Perhaps Parnis was unable to alter and customize the dress in time, except to attach a bow to the neckline. To her horror, McCaffree's prognostic nightmare came true: Mrs. Durrie Crane arrived at the tea wearing #448. Ever the consummate professional, Mamie took the mishap in stride. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for poor Mrs. Crane, who could not find a hole large enough to blessedly swallow her as she "clutched her fur cape around her," hoping she could slip by unnoticed. But Mamie spotted her. "Oh, you're wearing the same dress. I just love it, don't you?" the first lady asked disarmingly. Crane "blushing," uttered, "I just hope I look one-third as nice in mine as you do in yours." Noticing that Mamie's version of #448 had a bow at the collar, Mrs. Crane offered hopefully, "It's not really the same." Mamie quickly retorted, "Oh, yes, it is." Crane glumly despaired to reporters attending the event, "I could die!"[54]

Mrs. Crane may very well have wanted to die, but the story of the same-dress drama would not. *Life* magazine published a multi-page spread on the spectacle in their April 25, 1955, issue. The reporter contacted the true culprit—Mollie Parnis. Echoing Mrs. Crane, Parnis wailed that "I would like to drop dead." She admitted that she did not make any changes because the dress was "so pretty and so right" for Mamie as is. This was a big mistake. Or was it? *Life* did not end its story with Parnis's interview; they contacted women all over the country who had also purchased the now famous dress. Evidently, a bigger crisis would have unfolded at the same Senate Tea if Mrs. Bulkley Griffin, who attended the event, had not changed her mind at the last minute and worn another dress; there would have been *two* women outfitted in the same dress as the first lady! Photographs were published of ten women, all living in different corners of the United States, wearing their #448. A former Republican volunteer, J.V. Snyder, wrote Parnis a

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[53] Mary Jane McCaffree to Mollie Parnis, February 28, 1955, Mamie D. Eisenhower Papers, 1896-1979, DDEPL; on Arden, see Stacy A. Cordery, *Becoming Elizabeth Arden: The Woman Behind the Global Beauty Empire* (Viking, 2024),

[54] *Santa Rosa* (CA) *Press Democrat*, March 31, 1955.

sympathetic note: “Please don’t worry too much about Mamie,” she assured her. “Surely, publicity like this can’t hurt in our next campaign.”[55]

Not all purchasers of #448 were happy with the national spotlight. Mrs. Alexander Phillips dashed off a letter to Parnis, informing the designer that “I, unfortunately, have in my wardrobe your dress Model #448.” Mrs. Phillips claimed that she had only been able to wear her dress once before the nationwide publicity made it impossible to do so. Declaring that she would never wear it again, she scolded Parnis for revealing to *Life* the price and details of #448 as being “in poor taste.”[56]

Image #5
Newspaper photo of Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Mrs. Durrie Crane. They wore the same Mollie Parnis dress Model #448 at a Washington D.C. event. *State Journal Register*, Springfield, IL, April 1, 1955.

[55] *Life* Magazine, April 25, 1955; J.V. Snyder to Mollie Parnis, April 1, 1955, Mollie Parnis Collection, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter LBJPL).

[56] Mrs. Alexander Phillips to Mollie Parnis, April 22, 1955, Mollie Parnis Collection, LBJPL.

Poor taste or not, it is hard to believe that Parnis took no action when McCaffree warned her four-and-a-half weeks before the event of possible impending disaster so that she could change the dress. Reading her letters to Mamie many years later, it is easy to spot Parnis's sense of regret. Following what seemed to be a rather terse phone call from McCaffree two weeks later requesting Parnis's invoice, the designer pleaded with McCaffree to inform the first lady that she "considered it a labor of love and a real privilege to make these clothes for her." Not leaving anything to chance, Parnis followed up by sending Mamie an antique cup and saucer. The porcelain gift seemed to smooth any ruffled feathers, and Parnis admitted to Mamie that she had "thought deeply about your dresses since that publicity appeared." She promised henceforth to "personally see that your clothes are changed around enough so nobody will ever have exactly the same dress."[57]

Parnis's commitment illustrates how important the partnership with Mamie was to her. The two women continued to work together and developed a close friendship. Mamie wrote thoughtful thank-you letters to Parnis: "A visit like the one we had yesterday in New York certainly does wonders for my spirits—especially when friends like you show me so many kindnesses!" Even though high-profile women such as Wallis, the Duchess of Windsor, Margaret Truman, daughter of the former president, actress Claudette Colbert, and others, wore Mollie Parnis dresses, Mrs. Eisenhower was the *only* customer "for whom clothes are specially made." After the first year Mamie partnered with her "favorite fashion designer," the Parnis-Livingston firm grossed $4 million in sales. Sales increased steadily over the years, and at the height of the Eisenhower era, they reportedly exceeded $10 million. Parnis went on to design dresses for subsequent first ladies: Jacqueline Kennedy, Lady Bird Johnson, Pat Nixon, Betty Ford, and Rosalynn Carter. The living room in her Park Avenue apartment was featured in a coffee-table book by the interior designer Billy Baldwin as one of "America's one hundred finest living rooms." She and her husband enjoyed the means to collect Picasso and Matisse paintings. Prosperity and celebrity did not change Parnis, however. She, like Mamie, maintained a down-

[57] Mollie Parnis to Mary Jane McCaffree, April 14, 1953; Mollie Parnis to ME, April 14, 1953, both in the Mollie Parnis Collection, LBJPL.

to-earth attitude, and she confessed to never having been "addicted to the beautiful-people culture."[58]

A review of Mamie's collaboration with American industry executives indicates she employed a "hidden hand" strategy. Rather than imposing demands or micromanaging, Mrs. Eisenhower engaged with individuals whose expertise aligned with her interests. The first lady communicated her objectives and suggestions and granted her partners autonomy to produce exceptional products. Her curiosity enabled her to assess each business partner's capabilities, and she trusted them to deliver on what they had committed to doing.

Mamie's partnerships notably included successful collaborations with women executives, which resulted in increased visibility, financial success, and enduring achievements for their organizations and products. Paul Mazer, a Wall Street banker and chain-store consultant, asserted in 1953 that prosperity depended on mass consumption rather than mass production, highlighting the importance of stimulating consumer demand. Working alongside Margaret Hayden Rorke and the Textile Color Card Association, Mrs. Eisenhower played a pivotal role in bolstering American manufacturing with the introduction of "First Lady Pink" (by this time, "Mamie Pink") across various sectors such as fashion, home goods, appliances, and automobiles.[59]

When Mrs. Eisenhower met Helen Boehm, she observed the complementary roles Helen and her husband played as they shaped their porcelain manufacturing business. She noted President Eisenhower's appreciation for Boehm's artistry and subsequently commissioned the Polo sculpture upon recognizing the couple's vision. Although the Boehms were largely unknown at the time, Mrs. Eisenhower demonstrated confidence in their workmanship, which ultimately elevated the Edward Marshall Boehm studio to national prominence and affirmed Trenton, New Jersey, as a leading locale for porcelain art manufacturing.

Mamie also significantly contributed to the advancement of the American ready-to-wear fashion industry. Her association with selected designers generated immediate recognition for those individuals and firms, contributing to the sector's growth. The Model #448 incident

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[58] ME to Mollie Parnis, October 26, 1956, Mamie D. Eisenhower Papers, 1896-1979, DDEPL; London *Evening Standard*, November 27, 1953; *Tarrytown* (NY) *Daily News*, July 19, 1992; Syracuse *Post Standard*, July 17, 1969.

[59] Joseph L. Morse, *The Unicorn Book of 1953* (Unicorn Books, Inc., 1954), 295.

underscored Mrs. Eisenhower's resilience and authenticity, attributes that resonated with contemporary reporters and the wider public. She valued designers like Mollie Parnis who understood the practical needs and aspirations of American women and who promoted stylish, accessible clothing. Mrs. Eisenhower's influence helped democratize fashion and reinforced the ideal of mid-century American femininity. Her frequent use of designer contributions secured her place on "Best Dressed" lists during the 1950s.[60]

Teamwork was fundamental to Mamie Eisenhower's accomplishments, both in her marriage and professional associations. Her partnerships reflected disciplined decision-making and a laudable work ethic, both of which had been honed by years as a military spouse. Analyzing her partnerships with individuals, businesses, and organizations enables us to construct a comprehensive understanding of the impact of Mamie's actions and provides a clear view of her contribution to the role of first lady. These partnerships demonstrate above all that she acted independently from her husband, the president, and that she has been largely underestimated in the scholarly literature. A reappraisal is overdue.

[60] Binghamton (NY) *Press and Sun Bulletin*, November 9, 1953.

Making Mamie: How a Presidential Library Reinvented the Collective Memory of a First Lady

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Mamie Eisenhower has been relegated to history as a housewife who loved pink, as a social hostess and ceremonial presence, and as a first lady who overall "did very little else."[1] Although Mamie was popular during her eight years as first lady, the collective memory among the American public in the decades that followed her tenure in the White House was that she was merely a "happy 1950s homemaker."[2] By the late 1990s, her reputation had declined to the point where she ranked in the bottom ten of first ladies with Jane Pierce and Margaret Taylor.[3] Yet when the Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum reopened in 2019 after a $10 million renovation, the wife of the Supreme Allied Commander responsible for the victory of World War II found herself on prominent display. Over twenty percent of the museum's narrative incorporates Mamie—including a notable reference to "our career" early in the exhibition describing the Eisenhowers' partnership.

This gender analysis examines the making of Mamie and how the museum chose to address the national collective memory of this former first lady. More broadly, this study explores how gender is constructed in a space primarily focused on honoring masculinity and power in the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the fact that federal presidential libraries date back to

[1] Myra G. Gutin, *The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (Greenwood Press, 1989), 7.

[2] Gil Troy, "Copresident or Codependent?" in *The Presidential Companion: Readings on the First Ladies,* ed Robert P. Watson and Anthony J. Eksterowicz (University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 257.

[3] Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Lynne Rienner, 2000), 188.

1941 with the Franklin D. Roosevelt site, "little critical attention has been given to the American presidential library."[4] Yet examining how presidential memorials and libraries shape public memory, particularly in relation to first ladies, is important because "what is at stake in the commemoration of first ladies is the expression as well as repression of women's power in the United States."[5] In other words, how the history of first ladies is told is directly connected to how the story of U.S. women's history is told. As such, this study seeks to understand how Mamie Eisenhower is framed in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum, as well as how the professionals who oversaw the 2019 museum renovation explain their framing choices.

Literature Review

To provide context for the analysis of the Eisenhower museum renovation, an overview of the role of the first lady in U.S. history will be explored, as will the portrayal of Mamie by historians. The role of collective memory is also examined, as is the framing of women's contributions to history. First, however, understanding the creation—and subsequent critiques—of presidential libraries provides critical insight into why they even matter.

The Role of Presidential Libraries

Although Roosevelt is widely credited with the birth of the modern presidential library,[6] a former first lady actually generated the initial idea of preserving a president's legacy. After the death of James A. Garfield in 1881, Lucretia Garfield built an addition to her home to store her assassinated husband's books, letters, and papers.[7] Before the formal establishment of preserving presidential history, former presidents kept or discarded items as they wished since the materials were considered personal property. As a result, numerous presidential records were lost or even

[4] Jodi Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 4. The Hoover presidential library opened two decades later, in 1962. See https://hoover.archives.gov/about-us.

[5] Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (University Press of Kansas, 2005), 7.

[6] Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance,* 2; Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples,* 5.

[7] Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President* (Anchor Books, 2011).

purposefully burned, as was the case with George Washington and Chester Arthur.[8] Following Garfield's private efforts at her home, the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library and Museums opened in 1916 as another attempt to preserve presidential history. The museum refers to itself as "the forerunner for the federal presidential library system" even as it remains outside the system today.[9]

The concept of a federal presidential library began in the late 1930s as the magnitude of Roosevelt's presidential papers and collections rose, prompting him to think about the importance of saving history.[10] Although the initiative to build a library was ultimately successful, not everyone in Congress at the time supported the idea. In 1939, Republican Representative Dewey Short of Missouri blasted Roosevelt in a speech, noting "only an egocentric megalomaniac would have the nerve to ask for this legislation." He argued that Jesus, "the greatest of all men," didn't leave behind a library and Roosevelt didn't need one, either.[11] After pushing the bill through a Democratic Congress, Roosevelt spoke during his library's dedication ceremony in Hyde Park, New York, in 1941, about the need for citizens to learn from the past to be more knowledgeable in creating the future. He hoped that "millions of our citizens from every part of the land will be glad that what we do today makes available to future Americans the story of what we have lived and are living today."[12] More recently, George W. Bush evoked Roosevelt's comments connecting presidential libraries to the future of democracy during his own library dedication in Dallas in 2013: "Franklin Roosevelt once described the

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[8] Richard J. Cox, "America's Pyramids: Presidents and Their Libraries," *Government Information Quarterly 19*, no. 1 (2002): 45-75. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0740-624X(01)00094-6; Susan Svrluga, "After George Washington Died, His Wife Burned Her Letters. Except These," *Washington Post,* April 28, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/04/28/after-george-washington-died-his-wife-burned-her-letters-except-these/; McCandlish Phillips, "President Arthur Kept Illness a Secret," *New York Times,* September 18, 1972, https://www.nytimes.com/1972/09/18/archives/president-arthur-kept-illness-a-secret-president-arthur-kept-his.html.

[9] "Our History," Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library and Museum, accessed September 1, 2025, https://www.rbhayes.org/about-us/our-history/.

[10] Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance,* 2.

[11] Associated Press, "Roosevelt Library Project at Hyde Park Gets Approval," *Henderson* (NC) *Daily Dispatch*, July 14, 1939, 4.

[12] "Dedication," Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum, accessed October 1, 2025. https://www.fdrlibrary.org/dedication.

dedication of a library as an act of faith. I dedicate this library with an unshakable faith in the future of our country."[13] Currently, sixteen sites comprise the federal presidential system administered by the National Archives.[14] Of these, thirteen presidents from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush have presidential museums and libraries open to the public, with plans for Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden either in development or yet to be determined.[15] The Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 made these institutions possible, as the goal was to create a national system rather than have Congress debate each proposed library thereafter.[16]

The Eisenhower museum, initially intended to serve as a World War II military tribute site, opened in 1954 during Ike's presidency, with the presidential library dedication coming in 1962 after his second term ended. In 1971, the museum underwent a major expansion that doubled its size.[17] In the decades that followed, individual galleries were gradually and separately updated as funding became available. As a result, recent museum professionals frequently used the word "hodge podge" to explain the state of the Eisenhower museum by the 2010s.[18] Former deputy director Tim Rives described it as such in an oral history:

> And so it was really kind of an odd experience at that time. You would have a gallery that was, say, done in 1969, and then the Presidential Gallery had been redone in the late 1990s, but it's like every gallery had been done during a different time period, and museum fashions kind of come and change. So, you could see those differences.[19]

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[13] George W. Bush, "George W. Bush's Remarks at His Presidential Library Dedication," *New York Times,* April 25, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/26/us/politics/george-w-bushs-remarks-at-his-presidential-library-dedication.html.

[14] "Frequently Asked Questions: Presidential Libraries," National Archives, accessed September 1, 2025. https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/frequently-asked-questions.

[15] "Frequently Asked Questions." The Obama Presidential Center is set to open in summer 2026.

[16] Cox, "America's Pyramids," 51.

[17] "Eisenhower Museum Reopening Oct. 7," *Valley Falls* (KS) *Vindicator*, September 30, 1971, 2.

[18] Oral history interview with Meredith Sleichter. (2025). Making Mamie: Examining the Renovation of the Eisenhower Museum. Teri Finneman Papers. Kansas Historical Society; Oral history interview with William Snyder. (2025). Making Mamie: Examining the Renovation of the Eisenhower Museum. Teri Finneman Papers. Kansas Historical Society; Oral history interview with Tim Rives. (2025). Making Mamie: Examining the Renovation of the Eisenhower Museum. Teri Finneman Papers. Kansas Historical Society. https://www.kansashistory.gov/dart/units/view/506039

[19] Oral history interview with Tim Rives.

The museum was not expected to have a large financial endowment when it was established like the modern presidential libraries, Rives said. Therefore, there was little money for exhibits. "And so, they were kind of nickel and diming their way through sort of gradual improvements and different exhibits in the museum," he said. Bill Lazenby of The PRD Group, a museum design firm, also said "there wasn't a coherent single storyline" before the 2019 renovation.[20] When the museum closed in 2018 for construction, "that was the first time in more than forty-five years that there had been a complete overhaul," said Meredith Sleichter, executive director of the Eisenhower Foundation, in an oral history.[21]

Following the renovation, over 61,000 visits occurred at the museum in Eisenhower's hometown of Abilene, Kansas, in fiscal year 2024.[22] Overall, nearly a century after Roosevelt fought for the idea, over 1.1 million visitors went to a presidential museum in fiscal year 2024, illustrating that his vision for public education had come to fruition.[23] Yet even as presidential history became more accessible to the public, scholars have voiced criticism of the actual impact of the "democratizing effect" of these museums and they have pointed to the heavy hand of presidential advisers, family members, and presidents themselves in shaping the libraries' narratives.[24] In other words, critics believe presidential libraries are more so sites of public relations for individual men and their presidential power than accurate representations of administrations and U.S. history. The private-public partnership of a presidential library creates complexities as the sites rely on private foundations to raise money to build and support them, yet the institutions are also under the jurisdiction of the National Archives.[25] Therefore, tensions arise "between authenticity and reproduction, between education and entertainment, and between

[20] Oral history interview with Bill Lazenby. (2025). Making Mamie: Examining the Renovation of the Eisenhower Museum, Teri Finneman Papers, Kansas Historical Society. All oral history citations hereafter come from this collection.

[21] Oral history interview with Meredith Sleichter.

[22] "Frequently Asked Questions."

[23] "Frequently Asked Questions."

[24] Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance*, 2; see also Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Duke University Press, 2003).

[25] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples,*1.

history and 'heritage.'"[26] In this case, heritage refers to the promotion of positive narratives of the past while ignoring the negatives.[27] As such, Benjamin Hufbauer refers to these museums as "presidential temples,"[28] while Richard Cox calls them "America's pyramids."[29] Jodi Kanter describes presidential libraries as "performance" and notes that each museum "acts out a particular version of the American story in order to dramatize particular ideas about who the president is and what he does."[30] While many in the public view presidential museums as objective representations of the past, historians find them "inherently more subjective" in exhibit development and programming.[31] As a tourism site, presidential museums "try to live up to the public's expectations" and, as such, rarely "challenge visitors to question biases, belief systems, or perspectives on past events."[32] Cox more bluntly believes these museums are "more useful for tourism, the local economy, and unbridled hero worship" than as educational sites.[33] In other words, Roosevelt's idealistic vision of these sites contrasts sharply with how contemporary presidential library scholars have come to view them.

As for the Eisenhower museum specifically, the site received both scholarly praise and critique before its 2019 renovation. The museum earned commendation for doing better than others in acknowledging "the other America" in the 1950s and for recognizing that not everyone was prosperous during the administration.[34] Yet, other commentary noted the museum

[26] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 1.

[27] Michael Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 214-224.

[28] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, book cover.

[29] Cox, "America's Pyramids," article name.

[30] Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance*, 5.

[31] Larry. J. Hackman, "Toward Better Policies and Practices for Presidential Libraries," *Public Historian, 28*, no. 3 (2006): 167. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2006.28.3.165.

[32] Kate Lukaszewicz, "Laudations, Omissions, and Admissions: Skewing the Narratives in Presidential Libraries," *Polymath: An Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Journal,* 3, no. 4 (2013): 55-74; Bruce R. Craig, "Presidential Libraries and Museums: Opportunities for Genuine Reform," *Public Historian 28,* no. 4 (2006): 75–84. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2006.28.4.75 .

[33] Cox, "America's Pyramids," 56.

[34] Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance*, 167.

exaggerated the prosperity of the 1950s and did not address enough of the administration's failures.[35] Overall, examining the collective memory narrative created by presidential museums is important since these sites illustrate "how power is remembered."[36]

Memory, Gender, and Museums

Public, or collective, memory encompasses the "collective beliefs about the past that inform a social group, community, region, or nation's present and future."[37] Understanding the construction of collective memories matters because

> they can be commercialized for the sake of tourism; they can shape a nation's sense of identity, build hegemony, or serve to shore up the political interests of the state; and they can certainly influence the ways in which people understand their world.[38]

In relation to presidential libraries, these museums "help to manufacture" presidential public memory, with some institutions "more interested than others in presenting a fully rounded picture of their subject."[39] Memory scholar Barbie Zelizer correctly argues that "no single memory contains all that we know, or could know about any given event, personality, or issue."[40] In museum terms, this means no piece of wall text can tell visitors everything they need to know about a topic. Yet, the public considers museums to be "memory places" and holds a regard for them "seemingly unmatched by other material supports of public memory, at least in the United States."[41] Therefore, what is on display is widely believed to be a true telling of

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[35] Lukaszewicz, "Laudations, Omissions, and Admissions," 65.

[36] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 1.

[37] Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 181.

[38] Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds. *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (University of Georgia Press, 2006), xxi.

[39] G. H. Bennett, "'Goodbye Mr. President': Presidential Libraries and Public History in the USA," *European Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 1 (2003): 23. https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.22.1.23/0.

[40] Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the Past against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12*,* no. 2 (1995): 224, https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039509366932.

[41] Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, eds. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (University of Alabama Press, 2010), 25; Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (Columbia University Press, 1998), 105-106.
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history as "Americans put more trust in history and historic sites than in any other sources for exploring the past."[42] As such, the framing of the permanent exhibits in these museums is worthy of analysis since, due to the significant costs of renovations, the narrative selected could be on display for two or three decades.[43] In other words, the writing on the wall in both a literal and figurative sense creates a long-term impact for how millions of visitors are instructed to remember their presidents and U.S. history.

When considering the framing of first ladies in presidential museums, we should recognize that North American and European museums play a role in reinforcing beliefs about class and gender, particularly when they create historical narratives. A narrative of this type often "features and polices traditional gender roles."[44] Presidential commemorations specifically raise questions about "race, gender, national identity, and even national destiny."[45] In particular, national monuments have left out first ladies, despite the important contributions that they have made throughout history.[46] More broadly, beyond just first ladies, one analysis found 394 public outdoor sculptures in the United States recognized women, compared to nearly 5,200 for men.[47] A national monument audit created a list of fifty individuals represented with the most public monuments in the United States; only three women—Joan of Arc, Harriet Tubman, and Sacagawea—made the top 50.[48] In other words, tributes to U.S. women's history overall are severely lacking.

In Washington, D.C., first ladies have mostly been remembered during the past century through an exhibit of their dresses at the National Museum of American History. Although this is one of the most popular displays at the Smithsonian, arguments arise because it is problematic

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[42] Blair, Dickinson and Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," 26; Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past,* 105.

[43] Hackman, "Toward Better Policies and Practices for Presidential Libraries," 173.

[44] Amy K. Levin, *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader* (Routledge, 2010), 7.

[45] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 45.

[46] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples,* 106.

[47] Cari Shane, "Why the Dearth of Statues Honoring Women in Statuary Hall and Elsewhere?" *Washington Post*, April 15, 2011 https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/why-the-dearth-of-statues-honoring-women-in-statuary-hall-and-elsewhere/2011/04/11/AFx8lgjD_story.html.

[48] "National Monument Audit," Monument Lab, 2021. https://monumentlab.com/monumentlab-nationalmonumentaudit.pdf.

that the memory of first ladies has evolved so little since Helen Taft donated the first dress in 1912:

> Displaying first ladies' dresses, without also displaying their accomplishments and power, risked reducing women to ciphers of vanity and narcissism that portrayed women bodily but neglected their minds, their power, and their continuing and increasing participation in political life.[49]

Edith Mayo, a former curator of the exhibit, reflected on why the Smithsonian display is so popular, noting that women "are not allowed to see themselves as actors in history. Women, especially, are starved for women's history."[50] As such, it is important to next reflect on the role of first ladies in American history and on the memory of Mamie Eisenhower in particular.

The Role of First Ladies

Despite Martha Washington creating the role in 1789, first ladies did not begin receiving significant scholarly attention until the mid-1980s.[51] Presidential researchers "actively dismissed or misdiagnosed the role and importance of the first lady"[52] despite the fact that "much can be learned about U.S. history, political communication, gender roles, social advocacy, media, celebrity, and popular culture"[53] from studying this field. The women who serve as first lady are symbols of "American womanhood," since how they perform the role is believed to have "broad implications for all women."[54] Specifically, the word choices and framing strategies used by both first ladies and those who describe them "shape notions of femininity and so both foster and constrain women's agency."[55] Similarly, an argument can be made that first ladies help "shape

[49] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 107.

[50] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 136.

[51] Stacy Cordery and Nancy K. Smith, "It's About Time: Lighting the Legacies of First Ladies," *East Wing Magazine*, June 21, 2024, https://www.eastwingmagazine.com/p/its-about-time-lighting-the-legacies.

[52] Robert P. Watson, *The Presidents' Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (Lynne Rienner, 2000), 24.

[53] Lisa Burns, "Introduction: Why First Ladies Matter," in *A Cambridge Companion to U.S. First Ladies*, eds. Lisa Burns and Teri Finneman (Cambridge, 2025), 1.

[54] Karrin V. Anderson, "The First Lady: A Site of "American Womanhood," in *Leading Ladies of the White House*, ed. Molly M. Wertheimer (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 2.

[55] Anderson, "The First Lady," 2.

expectations of what women can properly do."[56] Therefore, the framing of first ladies in presidential museums not only communicates to visitors what the proper role is for a first lady but more broadly sends a message about the role of women in society and history.

Journalists and first lady scholars also play a role in shaping popular narratives, and some have widely dismissed the contributions of Mamie Eisenhower. Not long after her time as first lady ended in 1961, a White House correspondent wrote that "she was not the chief motivating force behind her husband's rise to the White House."[57] This female journalist made clear that Mamie played zero role in politics, policy, or advising her husband. Furthermore, Mamie "set no dramatic precedents as first lady."[58] Another summary of Mamie found that she "played a minor role in her husband's official life," and noted further "her lack of impact in substantive matters."[59] Other researchers declared the same. Mamie was merely a "partner in marriage" with "no social causes of her own to advance."[60] Another scholar uses Mamie's own words, downplaying her role to further cement her "just a housewife" frame: "Mamie Eisenhower was uninterested in her husband's official tasks. 'Ike runs the country, and I turn the lambchops,' she would say.'"[61] Curator William Snyder said in an oral history that, prior to the 2019 renovation of the Eisenhower museum, a dedicated space recognized Mamie "fairly typically: first lady, pretty dresses, elegant gowns," in an exhibit that had not been updated since the 1980s. Mamie received brief mentions in other parts of the museum, "but very, very little about her in the presidency," Snyder said.[62]

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[56] Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (Oxford University Press, 2010), xxi.

[57] Marianne Means, *The Woman in the White House* (Random House, 1963), 243.

[58] Means, *The Woman in the White House,* 243.

[59] Gutin, *The President's Partner*, 31.

[60] Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Kristen Paynter, "The Evolution of the Role and Office of the First Lady," in *The Presidential Companion,* eds. Watson and Eksterowicz, 215.

[61] Troy, "Copresident or Codependent?," 257.

[62] Oral history interview with William Snyder.

Yet, Dwight Eisenhower had a different view. In a 1963 interview, he noted how important Mamie's character, judgments, social skills, intelligence, and financial skills were to his presidency.[63] More recently, historian Anthony Ramas Maravillas has argued that Mamie was a "bridge" first lady between the traditionalists and modernists. He acknowledges that most people are familiar with the traditional portrayal of her. However, he maintains that her strong association with the 1950s has created misunderstandings. Similar to Ike, Maravillas pointed to Mamie's financial savvy managing the White House, her diplomacy hosting thirty-seven foreign heads of state, and her role in creating consumer trends with "Mamie pink," as evidence that she had a greater impact as first lady than is commonly believed.[64] A 1996 summit co-sponsored by the Eisenhower National Historic Site also examined Mamie's impact and influence. Cultural historian Karal Ann Marling has said that academics have "often shunned fashion" or found it to be "trivial," but the attention paid to Mamie attracted significant public attention at the time.[65] First lady scholar Barbara Perry also argues that the collective memory of Mamie "is less than she deserves,"[66] after being situated in history between Eleanor Roosevelt and Jackie Kennedy. Those who frame Mamie as "dowdy," "passive," or "old-fashioned" overlook the "genuine contributions to her husband's career and the country."[67] Insufficient understanding of the concept of "soft power" may be a factor in these narratives. Scholars argue that the "soft power" a first lady holds is more important than it appears. Activities like hostessing social events and dinners help their husbands build relationships and support for policies, humanize the president, and attract media attention.[68] Similarly, first ladies' fashion choices can serve as "a means of

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[63] Means, *The Woman in the White House*, 244-248.

[64] Anthony Ramas Maravillas, "Overrated Pleasures and Underrated Treasures: Mamie Eisenhower, a Bridge Between First Lady Archetypes," in *A Companion to First Ladies*, ed. Katherine Sibley (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 492-502.

[65] Karal Ann Marling, "Mamie's Hats: The White House, the New Look, and the Meaning of Style in the 1950s," in *Mamie Eisenhower: Wife, Mother, First Lady: Her Impact and Influence on Her Time*, ed. The Eisenhower Seminar (Eisenhower National Historic Site, 1998), 43.

[66] Barbara Perry, "Legacy, Memorialization, and Public Memory of First Ladies," in *A Cambridge Companion to U.S. First Ladies*, eds. Lisa Burns and Teri Finneman (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 366.

[67] Perry, "Legacy, Memorialization, and Public Memory of First Ladies," 367.

[68] Tammy R. Vigil, "US First Ladies: Political Assets and Liabilities" in *A Cambridge Companion to U.S. First Ladies*, eds. Lisa Burns and Teri Finneman (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 11-41.

communicating their brand" and what they value, while also "contributing to the public image of their husbands' administrations."[69] Michelle Obama confirms this in her recent book *The Look*, where she writes that she "understood that fashion was another opportunity for me to message to the world who I am and what I believe in."[70] Therefore, the "making" of any first lady is often more complex than people generally understand. With the above context in mind, this study aims to understand Mamie's portrayal in the Eisenhower presidential museum and offers an interpretation of how gender and memory are constructed.

Method

This multi-method examination incorporates both narrative analysis and oral history to understand the making of Mamie and the construction of gender in the Eisenhower museum renovation. The researcher visited the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in February 2025. Using a notebook and pen, a tally was created of the total number of wall texts and wall quotes to create a quantitative understanding of the extent to which Mamie is incorporated into the museum. Overall, there were 521 total texts, with 116 that mentioned Mamie, or twenty-two percent. The total tally includes every military uniform and weapon from World War II in the museum that is not directly tied to the Eisenhowers. There is also an interactive display near the front of a permanent exhibit called "Becoming Ike and Mamie" that illustrates their twenty-eight military postings and, later in the museum, there is a seven-minute video about Mamie in the first lady wing. This wing includes forty-five of the total wall texts about Mamie, illustrating that she does have a presence outside of that specifically gendered section. The researcher took individual photos of every wall text and artifact related to Mamie in the museum's main exhibit and in her specific gallery and then conducted a qualitative narrative analysis of her framing.

In March and April 2025, the researcher conducted five oral histories over Zoom with museum professionals directly involved in the 2019 Eisenhower museum renovation: the now-former museum director, the now-former deputy director/archivist, the curator, the foundation's executive director, and the design firm's senior content developer/director of research at the time

[69] Courtney Caudle Travers, "First Ladies as Trendsetters" in *A Cambridge Companion to U.S. First Ladies*, eds. Lisa Burns and Teri Finneman (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 245.

[70] Michelle Obama, *The Look* (Crown, 2025) 63.

of the renovation. Numerous attempts to reach surviving family members involved in the process were not successful. Oral history was employed as a methodology to create a permanent public record of the discussions, with the transcripts and audio submitted to the Kansas Historical Society.[71] The goal of oral history is to focus on "personal stories as a means of understanding the nuances of historical process, the positioned significance of historical events, and the perspectives of people whose stories are often not a part of standard historiography."[72] This study in particular wanted to go beyond just an exhibit analysis and also understand "the nuances of historical process" for a deeper consideration of how museum professionals construct gender and women's history.

Results

Before discussing the themes that emerged from analyzing the Eisenhower museum renovation, some brief context from the museum professionals behind it will be useful. In an oral history, former Director Dawn Hammatt said that an increase in scholarship about Mamie Eisenhower in more recent years helped the team see her "perhaps in a different way." The staff agreed that she had her own story to tell, as "we were able to see some of the things that Mrs. Eisenhower brought to the relationship, and it changed our idea maybe, or maybe changed the semantics that we use with her," Hammatt said.[73] At the same time, multiple members of the team referenced the influence of family members on the narrative. Bill Lazenby of The PRD Group, the design firm, said there were "strong opinions about how their grandmother should be represented," particularly in her own gallery.[74] Two themes thus emerge out of Mamie's portrayal in the museum: 1.) a political partner who played a critical role in her husband's success and 2.) a 1950s proud homemaker.

[71] See https://www.kansashistory.gov/dart/units/view/506039.

[72] Lindsay French, "Refugee Narratives; Oral History and Ethnography; Stories and Silence," *The Oral History Review* 46, no. 2 (2019): 268.

[73] Oral history interview with Dawn Hammatt. (2025). Making Mamie: Examining the Renovation of the Eisenhower Museum. Teri Finneman Papers. Kansas Historical Society. https://www.kansashistory.gov/dart/units/view/506039

[74] Oral history interview with Bill Lazenby.

Image #1
Mamie's first introduction to museum visitors is that she was a partner to Ike.

"Our Career"

The first theme—Mamie as a critical partner in political success—is evident throughout the main exhibit. As visitors enter the museum, the first panels feature Dwight D. Eisenhower's family and his youth before continuing in chronological order to the next space and when he meets Mamie. The first wall label to mention her is titled "Beginning a Partnership" and tells visitors that the Eisenhowers "quickly became partners in advancing Ike's military career." They

are described as “an ambitious couple”—not just Ike was ambitious, but both were—and Mamie is credited with creating “a social network that made the couple popular wherever they were stationed.” Therefore, upon immediate introduction, Mamie is framed as a powerful and successful woman. A large vertical display several feet away featuring an image of both Eisenhowers is paired with a wall label titled “Becoming Ike and Mamie,” again making her a central character in the museum bearing her husband’s name. Visitors learn “Ike and Mamie dedicated themselves to his career, taking assignments across the country and around the world … Mamie’s social skills and engaging personality helped ensure Ike’s career advancement.” She again is framed as critical to his success with the word choices defying her “just a housewife” collective public memory. The immediate message that visitors receive is “without Mamie, there is no Ike.” Yet another wall text reinforces this with the title “Our Career” and notes that Mamie “considered herself an equal partner to Ike.” This is complemented with a large wall quote from Mamie herself saying, “A wife plays a very big part … I bought into the partnership idea strongly.” Here, Mamie’s own words are used to solidify the museum’s portrayal of her and lend legitimacy to this narrative of her as a powerful equal. She also was credited with her own work outside of Ike through a panel explaining that she helped another military wife to establish a hospital for women and children in Panama. All of this is a far cry from her prior “I just turn lambchops” framing and is a direct reinvention of the collective memory of her.

Other framing that challenges prior notions of Mamie’s impact on history includes crediting her with playing a deciding role in the Eisenhowers’ move to Paris, which helped grow her husband’s reputation in Europe. Visitors are told that she continued hosting and attending social gatherings after their return to Washington in order to further build connections. One particularly noteworthy wall label features Philippine President Manuel Quezon with the quote, “You helped him earn it,” in reference to Ike receiving a Distinguished Service Star. The inclusion of this story serves as reinforcement that it is not just the museum or Mamie herself touting her partnership role but that major external figures also agreed with this narrative.

Although Mamie is largely absent in the World War II sections of the museum, her role is quickly reestablished in the post-war section with a wall label noting “Ike and Mamie took time to reestablish their partnership” after three years apart. This continues that key word of “partnership” from the beginning of the exhibit to ensure visitors did not lose track of it while browsing the war section. In the lead-up to the presidency, visitors learn Mamie “built the perfect

resume to become first lady" and "was good at campaigning," which is again illustrative of the "our career" framing from the front of the museum. Thus, the main exhibit storyline frames her as playing a central role throughout Ike's entire political life—from his early years in the military through his quest for the presidency. Her contributions are not just sequestered to one portion of the museum but, rather, are incorporated throughout to reinforce the "partner" progressive gendered narrative.

Certainly, more traditional gendered aspects are also present in the main exhibit wall labels, with Mamie described as beautiful, a debutante, and attractive. However, this is also notable as these adjectives challenge the collective memory of her as "dowdy."[75] Artifacts to illustrate her early married life include her earrings, engagement ring, a piece of wedding cake, a brooch, her wedding dress, and her early motherhood. Yet, Mamie is also praised amongst this for her education, her "enthusiastic personality" that "often put her at center stage," and her confidence. Overall, the gender narrative of the main exhibit renovation is clear: this "housewife" was a critical player in U.S. history, contrary to the collective memory of her doing little.

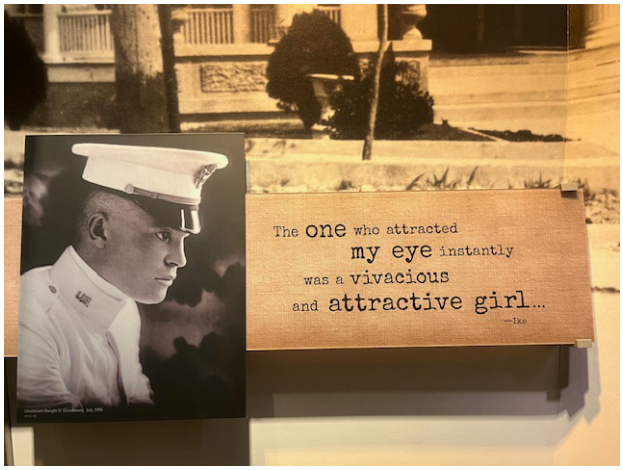

Image #2
Others have referred to Mamie as "dowdy," but the museum's exhibit emphasizes otherwise.

[75] See, for example, Kathleen M. German, "Mamie Geneva Doud Eisenhower," in *Inventing a Voice: The Rhetoric of American First Ladies of the Twentieth Century,* ed. Molly Meijer Wertheimer (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 224; David Wills, *Switched On: Women Who Revolutionized Style in the 60s* (Simon and Schuster, 2017), 43; Nancy Reagan, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (Random House, 1989), 39; Selwa Roosevelt, "Give the First Lady a Break," *Washington Post,* November 24, 1981, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/11/25/give-the-first-lady-a-break/4e2db860-3df0-424c-ba84-591b8e4f9bfd/.

Snyder, the museum's curator, said in an oral history that the team behind the 2019 museum renovation formed a consensus that Mamie needed to be included in the museum more than she had been. To do this, he said they were determined to let Ike and Mamie "tell their own story in their own words as much as possible." Snyder does not think Mamie gets the credit she deserves, and he wanted to play a part in helping transform the public's view of her. He said that he knows it may be surprising to see the word "partnership" used to describe the Eisenhowers' relationship as early as 1916 (around the time the couple met), but "there are just so many instances of [it], there would've been no Ike without Mamie." Snyder points out that she worked hard for Ike's career, which was also her career. The public misunderstands the totality of her role. "She was just as strong a character as he was. She worked just as hard as he did, in her own way, of course, and what was appropriate, if you will. And again, not necessarily by the standards of the day, but just for them as a couple," Snyder said.[76] Rives, the former deputy director, said an overall goal was to show that great figures in history like Ike do not do it alone.[77] Hammatt, the museum's former director, said her team saw the skills and talent that Mamie brought to the relationship that allowed her husband to advance: "At that time, the military spouses really had a role to play in all of that. And that's something that we felt we needed to share, her role in his military advancement," she said.[78] Lazenby, from the design firm, said a key priority in the renovation was to "give a strong voice to Mamie Doud Eisenhower and reveal the strength and depth of their partnership." He said that they wanted to ensure her role was not lost in the strength of Ike's military achievements: "Mamie was a clear individual and, in a lot of ways, an equal in that partnership. That's clear from the historical record."[79] Overall, members of the renovation team were consistent in their belief that Mamie's new gendered portrayal in the main exhibit is more historically accurate than the prior collective memory of her and that it was their duty as museum professionals to correct this narrative. Despite the dominant war-centered masculine backdrop of the building, this team wanted to make clear that Mamie's

[76] Oral history interview with William Snyder.

[77] Oral history interview with Tim Rives.

[78] Oral history interview with Dawn Hammatt.

[79] Oral history interview with Bill Lazenby.

contributions, previously invisible to the historical record or downplayed, actually extended her impact beyond the home.

"Proud Homemaker"

Visitors to the separate gallery dedicated to Mamie encounter a different experience, however. Contrary to the main exhibit that establishes Mamie as a political partner in "Our Career," those entering Mamie's separate wing are greeted with "Proud Homemaker" signage. The gallery, which is in the back half of the museum, uses large display cases to make her fashion the primary visual experience. The emphasis on dresses, hats, handbags, shoes, jewelry, and dinnerware is reminiscent of the Smithsonian's first lady dresses gallery. The wall labels frequently repeat wording related to home/family and look/style that reinforce the longstanding collective memory of her rather than challenge it, which thereby creates dueling narratives in the museum.

The "Proud Homemaker" introductory panel sets the tone for the gallery and notes that "Mamie took pride in making their house a home." The text tells visitors that she decorated thirty-six homes over the course of Ike's military career. Furthermore, "wherever they lived, Mamie created a home where their family and friends could relax in comfort." In other words, not only was she a proud homemaker but also a superior one who could replicate a strong home life dozens of times. Another panel calls her "First Grandmother" and emphasizes the Eisenhowers' love of their grandchildren. Notably, there is no mention of "first grandfather," only "first grandmother," even though both Eisenhowers are mentioned. Visitors learn that Mamie's "life revolved around family" and are reminded again of "the importance of family" in the display. This verbiage continues with "friends and family were the center of the Eisenhowers' world" with Mamie quoted saying, "I like nothing better than entertaining at home." The family and home theme continues with how she treated the staff as "The White House Family." Her homemaking skills are also noted, with praise for her as "Hostess for the Nation" and "Social Diplomacy." The wall label explains that the Eisenhowers "hosted more official events, state dinners, and informal gatherings than any previous administration." Again, this reinforces the gallery's theme that she is a superior homemaker far and above those who came before her and that this is an idealized performance of gender. A video playing in the gallery shows Mamie telling television anchor Barbara Walters that she wants to be remembered

"just as a good friend." Blown-up photos around the gallery illustrate her socialization with friends and family. Therefore, even the most casual visitor who does not read most of the museum signage could not miss these large font headlines and accompanying visuals touting Mamie's homemaker skills and idealized 1950s gender performance.

The repetition of "look" was the other prominent theme in the Mamie gallery, tying into historical trends of emphasizing a first lady's appearance. Visitors were not only told multiple times about "The Mamie Look" through the text on wall labels, but the entire gallery with the chosen collection items and pink tones emphasized appearance. Her hairstyle was explained—"I like my bangs and don't intend to change them for anyone"—and why she cut her hair short (the heat in Panama). Mamie's hair was not just her own, however, as "around the country, women of all ages emulated the first lady's *look*" (emphasis from author). Visitors are informed that the featured fashion display will rotate several times per year to show more examples, since there are so many items in the museum's storage: "Currently, the museum holds 28 handbags, 68 pairs of shoes, and 118 hats in the collection!" Mamie's fashion style is described as "an instant hit with the public" and "eclectic," as she mixed major designers with apparel from department stores frequented by other housewives. Her coordinated hats, handbags, and gloves "create[d] unique ensembles" that placed her on a best-dressed list, again illustrating her superior performance of her gender. "The Mamie Look" is further explained with words from Mamie: "An attractive, flattering hat always helps me feel my best and look my most confident." Her look and style extended beyond her clothing, however, and made their way into her home décor, with photos illustrating her use of pink and green in the bedroom and dining room. Her appreciation for "fine things" also carried over into her work on the White House china collection, a representation of the housewife's dominant domain of the kitchen.

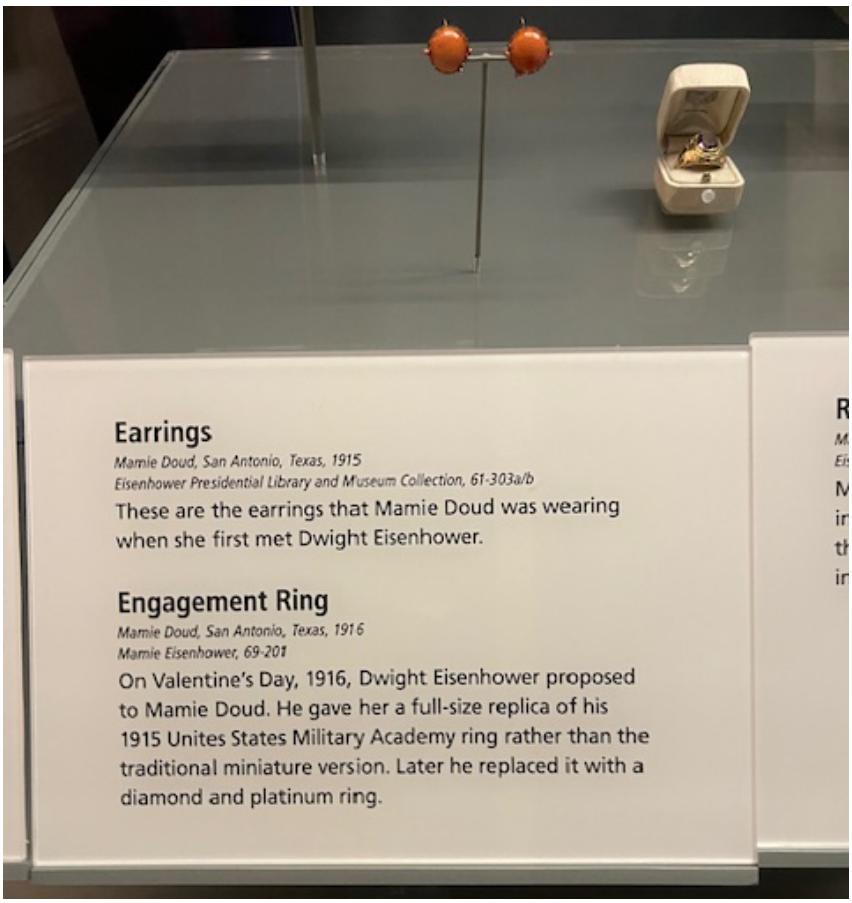

Image #3
Although the first half of the museum primarily focuses on Mamie's contributions to Ike's career, there are some fashion artifacts as well.

References to Mamie's impact outside of home and appearance did occur within her gallery, but to a much lesser extent. The prior partnership theme from the main exhibit came up briefly when describing her personality and her role as "an equal partner in the promotion of [Ike's] military career." There is also a reference to "the Eisenhowers' global diplomacy," plural, as in, both saw diplomacy as part of their White House roles. A pullout quote from Mamie featured in the gallery reads, "We women have to have a voice in things." Another quote from Mamie explained that personal appearance mattered as a soldier's wife since "it rates high on every officer's efficiency report, and his family is part of that report." In other words, there are brief connections that tie her appearance and housewife role with the earlier career framing. However, a visitor who does not read every piece of text and who is more focused on the dominant visual fashion displays could miss them. Similarly, there are brief mentions of

Mamie's social impact that give her more dimensions than a wife and hostess, such as inviting children of all races to the Easter egg roll, working on behalf of people with heart disease, anonymously supporting charities, and inspiring women voters to go to the polls. Yet, this is given a smaller amount of display space in the gallery that instead relishes its "Proud Homemaker" theme.

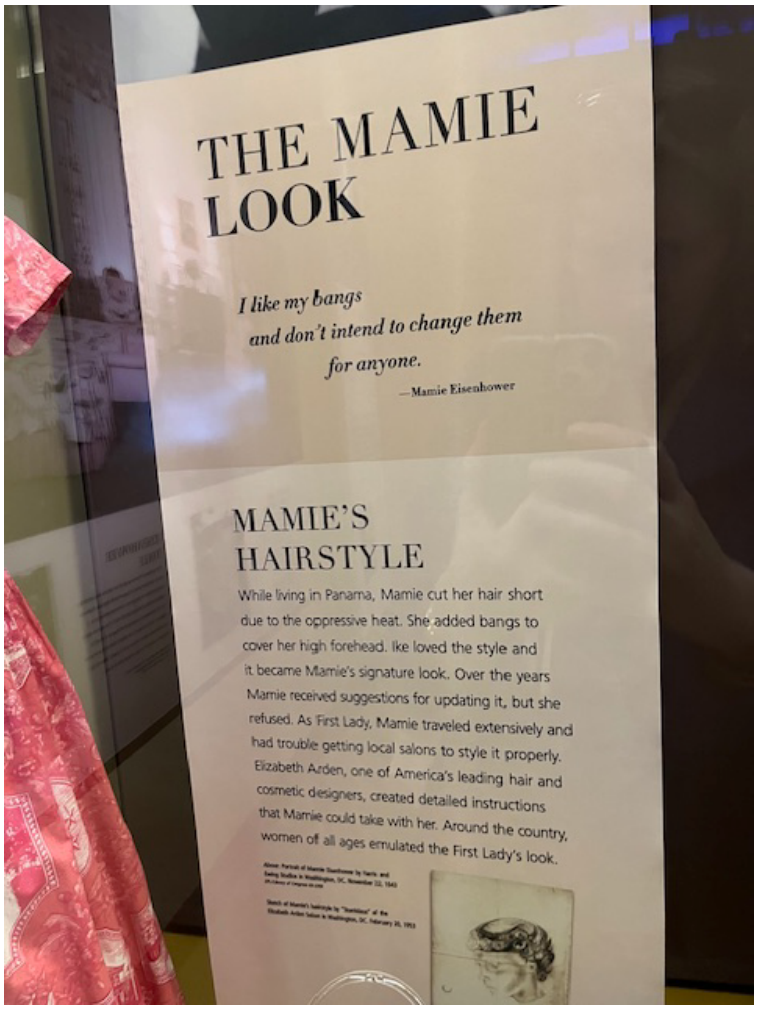

Image #4
The separate gallery devoted to Mamie in the museum places an emphasis on her fashion and homemaker skills.

Multiple members of the museum renovation team noted that the Eisenhower family wanted the separate wing for Mamie, which helps explain why her gender narrative is so distinctly different from the main exhibit and the gallery. Snyder recalled, "There was quite a bit of pushback on that, in that the concept of a first lady gallery, or if you will, a separate spouse

gallery, is considered kind of old-fashioned."[80] Rives also said that the original plan did not include a separate gallery. "It was that she was going to be part of the Eisenhower story and not just sort of in this first lady ghetto off to the side," he said.[81] Meredith Sleichter, the foundation's executive director, noted the family was "very adamant" about Mamie having her own gallery to display her own interests and the strengths she brought to the White House.[82] Lazenby recalled the family wanting to be precise about the choice of material and the way that Mamie was presented in her dedicated space. "Getting the Mamie pink just right was highly important to her granddaughters, that, you know, because of what they remembered about her and her exactitude, I guess, is maybe a good word for things being very precise. And honoring her memory was highly important for them in that way," he said.[83] Ultimately, the team agreed to both visions: incorporating Mamie throughout the museum and giving her a separate gallery, Snyder said.[84] This insight into behind-the-scenes decision-making returns to the point about the influence of those close to the president in shaping narratives.[85] Hammatt did say that the separate gallery also allowed for more storytelling about Mamie's role during the White House years since the main exhibit sections delve into themes like the Cold War and Space Race that made it more difficult to incorporate Mamie. "And so, we decided at that point that she deserved her own space to talk about what she was doing during the White House years, because the way we were telling those stories didn't really fit with her story," she said.[86]

Meredith Sleichter, the foundation's executive director, said the staff then needed to decide how to frame Mamie's gallery.[87] Her fashion became a focus since many people know Mamie as an icon with her color-coordinated outfits, Rives said. He also pointed out that visitors

[80] Oral history interview with William Snyder.

[81] Oral history interview with Tim Rives.

[82] Oral history interview with Meredith Sleichter.

[83] Oral history interview with Bill Lazenby.

[84] Oral history interview with William Snyder.

[85] Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance,* 2.

[86] Oral history interview with Dawn Hammatt.

[87] Oral history interview with Meredith Sleichter.

enjoy seeing these items of the collection, thereby drawing parallels to the popularity of the first lady dresses in the Smithsonian and what the public (tourists) has come to expect.[88] The museum also has "tons" of Mamie's clothing compared to what it has for Ike, Snyder observed. Although she made best-dressed lists, she was known for her "approachable" tastes that helped make her popular, including shopping at J.C. Penney and finding good bargains, Snyder said.[89] First ladies' fashion illustrates more than clothes since these women serve as international representatives of the United States, Hammatt noted. What they wear also illustrates support for American ideals and often recognizes the current economic state of the nation, she said. "And so, we had to recognize that Mrs. Eisenhower's fashion also had to tell the story of the '50s."[90] Overall, these explanations illustrate that the gallery helped to address general public interest—the tourism factor of presidential museums previously mentioned—and the gendered expectations of both the first lady and this period in history.

The renovation team also took design inspiration from the previously mentioned television interview between Barbara Walters and Mamie that now plays in the gallery. Recall that Walters asked Mamie how she wanted to be remembered, to which Mamie replied, "just a good friend." Sleichter said, "And so that is what then I think the committee agreed on, okay, whatever we do, this is what we want in her own words, is to exude, is that just a good friend, I'm just a good friend." Before answering the question on her own behalf, however, it is important to note that Mamie had been asked by Walters how she wanted *her husband* to be remembered. Though possibly unintentional, this set the stage for another "Ike runs the country, and I turn the lambchops" type of public response that shapes the collective memory of her husband rather than her own. Therefore, the combination of this singular highly publicized 1979 public response, the family's wishes for a separate wing, and the public's tourism interest in first lady fashion resulted in the creation of a gallery that stands in marked contrast to Mamie's portrayal in the rest of the museum.

[88] Oral history interview with Tim Rives.

[89] Oral history interview with William Snyder.

[90] Oral history interview with Dawn Hammatt.

Conclusion

Overall, the complexities of "making" Mamie Eisenhower in the renovated museum are clear both through the narrative analysis and the oral histories. Nonetheless, this study reinforces prior scholarship on presidential libraries on multiple fronts. For one, redesigns of museum exhibits "reflect newer values and understandings."[91] Certainly, much has changed in the field of women's history since Mamie Eisenhower was first lady in the 1950s and since the Eisenhower museum's last exhibit changes in the 1990s. The 2019 renovation makes a strong statement in the main exhibit that Mamie should no longer have a collective memory of "just" a housewife. Visitors are challenged to rethink not only her role as a partner in presidential history but also overall conceptions of the value of women in the early-to-mid 1900s. Museum professionals made clear that this narrative stems from Mamie's own words and from new historical scholarship offering a more accurate representation of her story. As such, the main exhibit provides a counternarrative to the prevailing collective memory of her, offering a revised story that will likely be on display for visitors to see for decades to come. As the center of Eisenhower research, this is a critical stance that challenges others to rethink their perceptions.

However, the dueling messaging between the main exhibit and Mamie's separate gallery also illustrates the challenges of women's history, first lady history, and the competing interests of stakeholders in presidential museums. While the collective memory of Mamie is reinvented in the main exhibit, it is reinforced in the gallery. The "nuances of historical process"[92] are clear through the oral histories explaining how this came to be. The role of family members in shaping these libraries' narratives, as explored by presidential library scholars Jodi Kanter and Diana Taylor, was also evident here, with one renovation team member noting "you do want to keep the family happy."[93] Yet, beyond the family, the fact that the museum had displayed dozens of items of Mamie's fashion in its collection in the first place—and relatively little of Ike's—illustrates more deeply embedded expectations of gender norms. The oral histories also referenced tourist interest in this aspect of first ladies, tying into the argument that presidential

[91] Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance,* 5.

[92] French, "Refugee Narratives," 268.

[93] Oral history interview with Tim Rives.

museums "try to live up to the public's expectations."[94] In other words, longstanding norms of how a first lady is defined and remembered—that ultimate symbol of "American womanhood"[95] –have become so synonymous with the women who perform that role that breaking away from prior expectations is challenging.

While the contrasting narratives within the museum are striking, Zelizer's prior commentary on memory is worth further reflection: "no single memory contains all that we know, or could know about any given event, personality, or issue."[96] In the context of this study, several questions are raised. Does Mamie have to be only one: a progressive political partner or a traditional housewife? Do women have to be confined to a binary set of choices on their identity and on their collective memory? Can the public be better educated on the importance of soft power? Rather than erase the prior simplified collective memory of Mamie, can the public instead grasp the complexity of individuals central to women's history? Certainly, by elevating Mamie's prominence in the museum bearing her husband's name, the team behind the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum renovation also prompted deeper questions—whether intentional or not—about how women are portrayed in museums. In the future, presidential museums may want to consider providing an explanation of what soft power means and make clearer the broader significance of hostessing and fashion to an administration.

Future studies should undertake a more comprehensive analysis of all of the first ladies' portrayals in the nation's presidential museums to compare and contrast the construction of gender in these "presidential temples."[97] Surveys of visitors as they leave the Eisenhower museum that ask about their main takeaways of Mamie Eisenhower would also be useful to understand which gendered narrative resonated most in their memories. As the Obama, Biden, and Trump libraries open in the next several years, examining whether these new museums frame first ladies differently than the older museums will be of scholarly interest. After all, how the history of first ladies is told is directly connected to how the story of U.S. women's history is told.

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[94] Lukaszewicz, "Laudations, Omissions, and Admissions," 63.

[95] Anderson, "The First Lady," 2.

[96] Zelizer, "Reading the Past against the Grain," 224.

[97] Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*.