

A Petticoat Society

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ABSTRACT

The 1829 marriage of Margaret “Peggy” O’Neal to Secretary of War John Eaton caused a societal war in Washington between President Andrew Jackson and the wives of his cabinet members. Margaret was raised to be a genteel woman, yet refused to conform to society’s prescription that she be submissive, obedient, pious, and pure. Margaret shocked Washington society when she became involved with Eaton before her first husband’s, John Timberlake’s, death, causing a scandal. The cabinet wives, led by Floride Calhoun, wife to Vice President John C. Calhoun, and Jackson’s niece, Emily Donelson, considered Margaret’s behavior before and after her marriage to Eaton unacceptable, according to the etiquette guidelines of the day and tried to remove her from Washington. Despite Jackson’s defense of Margaret, who reminded him of his late wife, Rachel Donelson, she was ostracized and vilified by the elite wives of Washington society, who had been dictating the social manners of the capital since the founding of the country. The societal war eventually forced Jackson to remove Eaton as Secretary of War, thereby, eliminating Margaret and her unladylike behavior from Washington society.

Keywords: Margaret Eaton, Peggy Eaton, John Eaton, Andrew Jackson, Petticoat Affair, Washington, Jacksonian Era, etiquette, morality

Una Sociedad de Enagua

RESUMEN

El matrimonio de Margaret “Peggy” O’Neal de 1829 con el Secretario de Guerra John Eaton causó una guerra social en Washington entre el presidente Andrew Jackson y las esposas de los miembros de su gabinete. Margaret fue educada para ser una mujer gentil,

pero se negó a ajustarse a la prescripción de la sociedad de que ella era sumisa, obediente, piadosa y pura. Margaret sorprendió a la sociedad de Washington cuando se involucró con Eaton antes de la muerte de su primer marido, John Timberlake, causando un escándalo. Las esposas del gabinete, dirigidas por Floride Calhoun, esposa del vicepresidente John C. Calhoun, y la sobrina de Jackson, Emily Donelson, consideraron inaceptable el comportamiento de Margaret antes y después de su matrimonio con Eaton, según las directrices de etiqueta del día y trataron de eliminarla de Washington. A pesar de que Jackson defendió a Margaret, quien le recordó a su difunta esposa, Rachel Donelson, fue rechazada y vilipendiada por las esposas de élite de la sociedad de Washington, que habían dictado las normas sociales de la capital desde la fundación del país. La guerra social eventualmente obligó a Jackson a eliminar a Eaton como Secretario de Guerra, eliminando así a Margaret y su comportamiento anodino de la sociedad de Washington.

Palabras clave: Margaret Eaton, Peggy Eaton, John Eaton, Andrew Jackson, Petticoat Affair, Washington, Jacksonian Era, etiqueta, moralidad

衬裙社会

摘要

玛格丽特·佩吉·奥尼尔与战争部长约翰·伊顿于1829年成婚，此事在华盛顿地区引起了总统安德鲁·杰克逊和其内阁成员妻子之间的社交危机。玛格丽特被培养成为一名上流社会女性，然而却拒绝服从社会（对女性）的要求：顺从、服从、虔诚、纯粹。玛格丽特因其在第一任丈夫约翰·汀布莱克去世之前便与伊顿卷入桃色新闻一事震惊了整个华盛顿社会，造成丑闻。各内阁成员的妻子——由副总统约翰·C·卡尔霍恩的妻子弗洛丽德·卡尔霍恩和杰克逊总统的侄女艾米丽·多内尔森共同领导——依照当时的礼仪规范，认为玛格丽特在嫁给伊顿前后的行为不可接受，并试图将她驱逐出华盛顿。尽管杰克逊总统维护玛格丽特，后者让他想起其已故妻子雷切尔·多内尔森，但玛格丽特还是被华盛顿社会精英阶层的妻子所排斥和诽谤，她们自建国以来便一直掌管着华盛顿的社交礼仪。这场社交危机最终驱使杰克逊总统将战争部长伊顿革职，因此将玛格丽特和其有失贵妇风范的行为彻底消除在华盛顿社会之外。

关键词：玛格丽特·伊顿，佩吉·伊顿，约翰·伊顿，安德鲁·杰克逊，衬裙事件，华盛顿，杰克逊时代，礼仪，道德

What did it mean to be a genteel woman in Washington society in the Jacksonian Era? Polite women were supposed to be domestic, submissive, obedient, quiet, pious, pure, good. That was threatened when Margaret “Peggy” O’Neal Timberlake married John Eaton, the good friend and, biographer of 1828 presidential elect, Andrew Jackson. Margaret defied what it meant to be a woman of gentility in the nation’s capital. She was none of those things, despite being brought up to be a gentlewoman in the early nineteenth century. Her atypical behavior caused a societal war, called the Petticoat Affair, between the ladies of Washington and President Andrew Jackson that nearly led the government to fall. The primary reason for the Petticoat Affair, in which Margaret “Peggy” Eaton was publicly ostracized and treated like a villain by the elite wives of Washington society, was because her improper womanly behavior before and after her marriage to John Eaton threatened the morality of Washington.

Before Margaret Eaton entered the elite social circles in Washington, DC, in 1829 with her husband, rumors were circulating about her character among the wives of the politicians, members of Congress, and other prominent figures in society. Margaret Bayard Smith, daughter of a Continental

Congressman and wife of Samuel Harrison Smith, writer and, editor of the *The National Intelligencer*, wrote in a letter to Mrs. Andrew Kirkpatrick, wife of the Chief of Justice, in January 1829, about John Eaton’s marriage to Margaret O’Neal Timberlake earlier that month. Smith criticized Eaton’s new wife, “whose reputation, her previous connection with him before and after [Timberlake’s] death, has totally been destroyed.”¹ She explained further that “[Margaret] has never been admitted into good society, is very handsome and of not an inspiring character and violent temper.”² Even Andrew Jackson’s supporters and friends were “very much disturbed about [the marriage].”³ Why did she have such a bad reputation that the social and political spheres in Washington were disturbed by it? The answer can be found in Margaret’s past, beginning with her childhood.

Margaret O’Neal was born December 3, 1799, in Washington, DC, to Irishman William O’Neal and Rhoda Howell. “Born with a ready tongue and a brilliant beauty,” she became the pet of politicians and congressmen, who missed their children and grandchildren, while they stayed at her parents’ boarding house, Franklin House, and tavern.⁴ Famous boarders included the Marquis de Lafayette, Henry Clay, Post-Master General William Bar-

ry, two-times Vice President George Clinton, Revolutionary fighter Thomas Sumter, and Thomas Jefferson's son-in-law, Felix Grundy. As a young child, she was described as "a lively sprite" and having a "strong will," but that did not stop her male admirers from dotting on her, reading her bedtime stories, and spoiling her.⁵ It was even argued that her own father spoiled her so much with gifts fit for a duchess that he acted more like her lover than her father.⁶ Due to these affections at an early age, Margaret became "instinctively aware that she could not only command men's admiration by variable expressions," such as small kisses on the cheek or curtsying, "but control it also."⁷ She even remarked that "while ... still a girl in pantalets and rolling hoops with other girls, I had the attention of men, young and old, enough to turn a girl's head."⁸ According to the *Daily Alta California* in 1888, growing up in a boarding house and tavern "was about the worst possible place to bring up a virtuous girl in, for it was the special rendezvous of the gay and dissipated."⁹ Therefore, Margaret's parents thought it best to give her a genteel education to curb the character they saw forming in their daughter.

What was gentility? According to Margaret Bayard Smith's, *What is gentility?* A moral tale,

"gentility was independent of birth, wealth, or condition, but is derived from that cultivation of mind which imparts elevation to sentiment and refinement to manners in whatever situation of life they may be

found; knowledge acting upon character, as fire upon gold, purifying it from any base or gross admixture."¹⁰

In other words, gentility was learned. In the tale, a woman and her husband started in the lower class, but when their whiskey business took off, they became wealthy. Since the mother knew that riches could not make them genteel, she and her husband sent their children off to school, their object: to get them to become a lady and gentlemen. Although the sons made good progress in becoming gentlemen, the daughter did not. Despite being sent to the best schools, learning dance, music, and French, and dressing much smarter than the other girls at school, she was not accepted due to her habits and manners, because they were different from that of a well-educated polite society.¹¹ According to this tale, if gentility could be learned, then Margaret had a good chance of becoming a genteel woman at school.

Margaret was well educated beyond her social class, that of an inn-keeper's daughter, having gone to the same private schools as the children of the elite, but she did not behave in the manner expected of her education. In contrast to her genteel education, which included etiquette, piano, dance, and French lessons, Margaret lacked refinement and delicacy, had vulgar speech and frequently flirted with the male travelers staying at the boarding house. She was loud, and she injected herself in not only conversations between men at Franklin House and the

tavern, but into political ones. It would have been easy for her to do that since she grew up around politicians and listened to the best and worst news from Washington.¹² However, according to Queena Pollack, “men resented women’s intrusion in politics.”¹³ J. Kingston Pierce agreed with Pollack in that “women were expected to be submissive and demure, domestic and irreproachably virtuous and utterly uninterested in politics, much less be able to agree on governmental issues.”¹⁴ Margaret’s ability to easily converse with them on such topics made her a novelty, but it was not how a lady should have behaved, especially a genteel one.

How a young lady of genteel influence should behave in Jacksonian America could be found in etiquette manuals. According to Abel Bowen’s *The Young Lady’s Book*, a young lady was to exude piety; integrity; fortitude; charity; obedience; consideration; sincerity; prudence; these were the amiable qualities of a moral character.¹⁵ Bowen further illustrated that prejudice, bad habits and conduct, and faults in virtue would take “deep root” if not corrected early on.¹⁶ In Emily Thornwell’s *The Ladies Guide to Perfect Gentility*, young ladies should be amiable, have perfect manners, avoid ostentation, and “guard themselves against affectation” and converse with “dignified modesty and simplicity” when speaking with a gentleman.¹⁷ A young lady should also “never say or do anything that may lead [men] to suppose you [sic] are soliciting their notice.”¹⁸ Furthermore, it was encouraged that if a man showed interest, a young lady should refuse his

attention, only giving a small smile or nod. Better yet, Thornwell wrote, that the lady should pretend not to notice such flattery, not even dignify them with a response. She concluded by saying that a young lady should never address a gentleman she did not know and not talk excessively, for “the less you say the better ... even ... if you are gifted with the best powers of conversation, it would be wise for you to guard against excessive loquacity.”¹⁹ By refusing to conform to that prescription for gentlemanly behavior, Margaret committed her first cardinal sin and continued to turn heads well into her teens and adulthood.

At age 13, Margaret considered herself a full-fledged woman and ready for love. She found herself in fights of affection between several young men, even attempting an elopement with one of her young suitors until it was foiled by her father. She would descend the tavern staircase in Grecian gowns, hair done in the latest fashion, flirting with men with her voluptuous form. There was even a rumor that she had a tryst with Thomas Jefferson’s Secretary of Treasury, Albert Gallatin, and politician Richard Call. According to the genteel rules of Washington society, this was criminal; she was not genteel; she was a loose woman. Some could say that it was not her nonconformity to genteel rules that led her astray of proper behavior, however, but lack of being reared properly by her mother.

In Jacksonian America, mothers had the sole responsibility for the physical well-being of their children, as well

as their moral character; the home was where moral character began. Daniel Feller posited that a good moral upbringing would prevent children from growing up to be social deviants.²⁰ Moreover, it was a mother's job to imbue in their daughters a temperament for domesticity. The home was a woman's universe, where she was supposed to be obedient, submissive, pious, and pure, all the while ensuring that her children were morally good.²¹ Therefore, it could be argued that Margaret's mother failed to raise her according to the moral guidelines of the day and was ultimately to blame for her loose behavior. Whatever the reason, Margaret's troubles with her behavior had just begun.

In 1816, she met John Bowie Timberlake, a navy purser staying at Franklin House, whom she thought very attractive; she was determined to marry him. Later that year, at the age of 16, she and Timberlake were wed. Margaret became the mother to two daughters by 1818 before Timberlake was shipped abroad for four years with the navy. Meanwhile, Andrew Jackson and his military friend and biographer, John Eaton, had come to stay at Franklin House. This set off a chain of events that would cement Margaret's reputation among the elite wives of Washington, DC. The triangle between Jackson, John Eaton, and Margaret O'Neal Timberlake would become known in Washington as the Petticoat Affair, also referred to as the Eaton Affair.

When Jackson and Eaton came to stay at Franklin House in 1823, Margaret was no longer a girl but a wom-

an. She was helping her father run the boarding house and tavern and openly and frequently participated in the political debates between men, which was not the social norm for women.²² Nonetheless, Jackson and Eaton took a liking to her immediately and, they became friendly with the couple. Before Timberlake shipped off in 1824, he tasked Eaton to look after his wife and children, for they had become good friends. Therefore, with Timberlake away, Eaton began escorting Margaret to social functions; however, they were seen sitting together on the front porch at twilight, alone. As a married woman, this was considered inappropriate behavior, because a married, well-educated woman would not be alone in the company of a man without her husband or another person present.²³ This behavior did not bode well for Margaret in the coming year, considering she was already talked of being sexually improper.²⁴ Again, she did not conform to the rules of genteel society.

The friendship between Eaton and Margaret grew over the years while her husband was gone. Then, in April 1828, came the news that Timberlake had committed suicide while abroad. Rumors began circulating that Timberlake had learned of an affair between his wife and Eaton and rather than face the embarrassment; he killed himself in a drunken rage. John F. Marszalek argued that Timberlake most likely killed himself due to depression over recent financial difficulties and bad health as he suffered from severe asthma attacks.²⁵ However, even if that were true, the rumors had spread too quickly about his

sensational death. News of the affair reached Jackson during his 1828 presidential campaign. He did not believe the rumors about Margaret and Eaton; he believed her to be a respectable woman and him as a trusted advisor and friend. Had Jackson fallen under Margaret's spell? Having dealt recently with his wife's, Rachel Donelson's, death, Jackson most likely felt it was his patriarchal duty to come to Margaret's defense.

Jackson's wife, Rachel Donelson, was the daughter of John Donelson, a founder of Nashville, Tennessee. In 1785, Rachel first married Lewis Robards, who had a bad temper and was prone to jealousy. Having first met the Robards when he came to stay at their house, Jackson saw that Rachel was not happy with her husband and elected to escort her to Florida when her husband moved away from her. Jackson did not care how that looked to outsiders; he felt she needed his protection. Rachel believed that Lewis had granted her a divorce and married Jackson. However, that was not the case, and Rachel was labeled an adulterer and bigamist. Once the divorce from Robards was finalized a few years later, Jackson wed Rachel again to make their marriage legal, but the damage had been done, her status as an adulterer and bigamist was cemented and had been drawn into the press. Jackson's political opponents in 1827 used this to their advantage and vilified her. Although Jackson spared her most of the bad rumors, she found out and panicked. Just after her husband had won the 1828 presidential election, she suffered two heart attacks

and died. Jackson was "convinced that his political enemies had killed his wife with their slanderous attacks in order to get him."²⁶ No longer able to defend his wife against villainous rumors, he felt it was his patriarchal duty to come to the defense of Margaret, who he believed had been wronged, just like his wife.

Hoping to squash the rumors about Margaret as an adulterer and a loose woman, John Eaton professed his love for Margaret in December 1828 to Jackson. With Jackson's full support and encouragement, Eaton proposed to Margaret and she accepted; they married in January 1829, less than nine months after Timberlake had died. According to Marszalek, "marrying so quickly after the death of a husband violated one of the most serious proscriptions of genteel American society."²⁷ He further added that a "widow of gentility was to alter her life significantly for one to two years after her husband's death to indicate proper respect and grieving for him."²⁸ Widows were supposed to wear black, not leave the house except to go to church, nor attend social events, they were to display, publically, proper sorrow demanded by society. By getting married so soon after her late husband's death, Margaret committed yet another cardinal sin of genteel society; she violated the grieving ritual. Jackson and Eaton had hoped that all the gossip surrounding Margaret would cease after the marriage, but it only got worse.

Washington society was disgusted with Margaret, and Jackson's presidential win only aided in that disgust. Margaret Bayard Smith sensed a change

coming to their society, and not a good one. In a letter to Mrs. Kirkpatrick in January 1829, she dwelled upon the fact that the goodness and greatness of John Quincy Adams' presidency had fallen into a "cold and narrow grave" with Jackson's election.²⁹ She lamented on the fact that Jackson may not be able to be controlled once in the White House with the passing of his wife, for society believed that she "could control the violence of his temper, sooth the exacerbations of feelings always keenly sensitive and excessively irritable."³⁰ Smith feared that "not only the domestic circle but the public will suffer from this restraining and benign influence being withdrawn."³¹ There was much anxiety and impatience about the future. In a letter to her son, J. Bayard Smith, in February 1829, she said that the public would never be satisfied with any position given to Eaton "which would bring his wife into society. Everyone acknowledges Genl [sic] Eaton's talents and virtues, but his unfortunate connection is an obstacle to his receiving and place of honor"³² Later in the letter, she jokingly said how Eaton should be sent as the minister to "Hayti [sic]" because that was the "most proper court for [Margaret] to reside in."³³ The ladies of Washington did not want to accept Margaret into their folds. She was a "sexually loose, unchaste, unfaithful" woman, who defied "genteel convention" by being "too forward and outgoing for proper society."³⁴ Simply put, she was not one of them, and she was better off living in another country. Nevertheless, Margaret tried to fulfill her obligations to society as Eaton's wife.

John and Margaret wasted no time in fulfilling their new obligations to society like any other genteel person. After Jackson took office, The Eatons visited the Vice President, John C. Calhoun, and his wife, Floride, as was the rule in elite social circles.³⁵ However, due to Margaret's reputation, Floride decided to not to return the visit and led the assault of insults on Margaret to which other cabinet wives, Berrien, Branch, and Ingham, followed suit. The president's niece, Emily Donelson, was even against her. According to Marszalek, "to visit someone was a serious matter; it indicated acceptance of that individual into the genteel society of that community."³⁶ Therefore, by not returning the visit, it showed that Margaret was not an acceptable member of Washington society. Jackson, who saw his late wife in Margaret, exiled Emily back to Tennessee because she would not accept Margaret into society. He also tried to get the members of his cabinet to control their wives but to no avail. Margaret tried visiting other leading women of Washington society, but she was ignored. She was even ignored at a ball in which the "cabinet dames would float away and vanish into thin air upon [Margaret's] approach"³⁷ Margaret was officially shunned from Washington society. According to Nancy Morgan, "social networks provided a veneer of cordiality over the serious business of building alliances," and the wives of Washington clearly did not want an alliance with Margaret Eaton.³⁸ How dare she think that she could be accepted into society with all of those transgressions! By the spring, there

were reports of “a thousand rumors and much tittle-tattle and gossip [sic] and prophesying and apprehensions,” which continued to doom Margaret. The ladies of Washington started a war against a woman who had “left her strait [sic] and narrow path,”³⁹ and they were winning. Members of the clergy, like Presbyterian preacher Ezra Stiles Ely, also tried to oust Margaret from Washington because they also believed her to be a threat to Washington society.

In a letter to Andrew Jackson on March 18, 1829, Reverend Ezra Stiles Ely cataloged all of the indiscretions against Margaret thinking that Jackson had no prior knowledge about her reputation and that was why John Eaton was appointed to the cabinet. By disclosing the rumors, Ely hoped to have John Eaton ousted from the cabinet, thereby removing Margaret from Washington society. According to Ely, there were six transgressions committed by Margaret: she was a “lewd woman, ... excluded from society before her first and second marriage”; she slept with a man who frequented the tavern; was overheard telling a servant to call her two daughters by the last name of Eaton instead of Timberlake, because he was their real father; Mr. Timberlake said he would never return “on account of Eaton’s seduction of his wife”; a clergyman said she had a miscarriage when Mr. Timberlake had been away for more than a year; Mr. Eaton had plotted to free Margaret from Timberlake.⁴⁰ He concluded the letter by saying that he had “seen enough of Mrs. E to confirm these reports” and that if Jackson did not remove Eaton from the cabinet that

“she will do more to injure your peace and your administration than one-hundred Henry Clays.”⁴¹ In response to Ely, Jackson invoked his education as a lawyer and demanded Ely bring him proof of the slanderous accusations against Margaret, for he must have been badly advised. Innocent until proven guilty. Jackson fully believed that Clay and his “minions” were behind the destroying of her character “by the foulest and basest means, so that a deep and lasting wrong might be inflicted on her husband.”⁴² This would later change to him blaming Calhoun since his wife led the charge against Margaret. He wholeheartedly believed Margaret to be a virtuous woman. Jackson ended his tirade by saying that he has had and will never have anything to do with the ladies of Washington and that they should be shunned like a “pestilence of the worst and most dangerous kind” and hoped suspicion on her character would vanish upon proof.⁴³ Letters would be volleyed between Jackson and Ely until 1831 over the matter. Arguments with Ely over Margaret “helped turn Jackson against self-anointed guardians of Christian virtue,” leaving him no choice but to quit his church.⁴⁴ According to Daniel Feller, “Jackson saw his election in 1828 as a triumph of the plain people over the aristocrats. He came to Washington believing that a clique of insiders had leagued themselves against him and the common citizens of the country.”⁴⁵ The Petticoat Affair had proven that to be true; it was all anyone was talking about. It consumed him so much for the first two years of his presidency that he dismissed his

entire cabinet in 1831, and the political sphere held her responsible. Margaret herself even confronted her accusers, which was viewed as aggressive, man-like behavior: "I sprang to my feet and approached Dr. Ely in a menacing attitude for it was no time then to remember proprieties."⁴⁶ Although Jackson and Margaret had put up a good fight, Washington society had won their war against her. Eventually, Jackson had no other option but to appoint John Eaton as minister to Spain where he and Margaret lived for many years.

Another reason Margaret may have been shunned from Washington society was her heritage. She was the daughter of an Irish inn-keeper "at a time when to be an Irish servant girl meant being considered unsettled, reckless, slovenly, dishonest, [and] intemperate."⁴⁷ Although she was not purely Irish, it was too easy to "equate her with poor women who waited on and clean[ed] houses of the genteel middle class."⁴⁸ Consequently, since her family ran a boarding house, Margaret was seen as more of a servant girl, who was uncultured, and therefore, could never be a lady, let alone a lady in the capital. The capital of the country had a unique society, unlike that of any other in the nation; it was nearly a kingdom, in which the elite wives ruled like queens.

Washington society in the nineteenth century was unlike any other in the country. It began at the birth of the nation when George and Martha Washington instilled a set of rigid etiquette rules using Old World customs combined with New World titles and rank

for the governing class of the country. Then, in 1789, Martha Washington began having drawing room parties every Friday night. Those parties became so much like "monarchical ceremonies" that those who attended them referred to it as the Republican Court.⁴⁹ There, women dominated and, like queens, came up with new ideas of manners in society, because, according to them, manners equaled a civilized nation, not its laws or constitutions.⁵⁰ Despite a small break with the election of widower Thomas Jefferson in 1800, who hated "court" etiquette and had them banned, First Ladies and other elite wives dictated the social norms of Washington society for many years. That is until Andrew Jackson was elected president and brought with him vulgar and chaotic democratic values. Madeline Vinton Dahlgren alluded to that in her book on etiquette in Washington society in 1873. She wrote that Jackson "broke down the barriers of careful respect and received all comers without any formal or special rules; the consequence was that a disorder and rudeness characterized those receptions hitherto unknown and which no private gentleman in the country would have tolerated in his own home."⁵¹ Was she talking about how Jackson came to the defense of an immoral woman that nearly brought down an entire administration? It was likely the case.

As a result of the social norms dictated by the First Ladies and other elite wives since the founding of the country, Washington by the nineteenth century was "principally official, ... composed in so great a degree ... that the

social obligations [had] become about as complex as the constitutional laws," according to Dahlgren.⁵² On a visit to the capital city, Francis Trollope, an Englishwoman, concluded that Washington was where the "elite ... body of citizens" resided; it was the best place to live than any other city in the country.⁵³ Therefore, it could be seen why Margaret's nongentlewomanly behavior and entrance into Washington society after her marriage to John Eaton would have upset the women who controlled its social norms. Their ostracization and vilification of her was an attempt to push her out of Washington so that its morality would remain intact.

Unfortunately for Margaret, her reputation followed her throughout the rest of her life. At age 59, many years after John had died, she married one of her grandchildren's dance instructors, Antonio Buchignani, who was 40 years her junior. Once again, she was a pariah. Antonio eventually left Margaret to marry the granddaughter, taking all of her money with him to Italy. Margaret O'Neal Timberlake Eaton Buchignani died lonely and destitute on November 8, 1879. She was laid to rest next to John Eaton in the same cemetery as the men and women who barred her from entering genteel Washington society between 1829 and 1831. She was now their neighbor, equal in every way.

The gossip and tattling of the cabinet wives and other ladies of Washington could be seen as a violation of etiquette, too, however. Charles William Day wrote a manual which gave men and women a prescription on the

proper course of becoming a lady and a gentleman. In agreement with Margaret Bayard Smith that gentility was not a birthright and that it was a learned behavior, he said that conversations will happen

"in which opinions are given, and motives scrutinized, ... but there are none ... so despicable as those traitors to society who hurry from house to house, laden with remarks made by one party upon another; stirring up discord and strengthening hatred wheresoever they appear"⁵⁴

He concluded the section in saying that it was best not to say anything at all, only "fancy the result."⁵⁵ Therefore, if Washington society etiquette was more strictly observed than others, then it can be concluded that Floride Calhoun, Emily Donelson, and cabinet wives Berrien, Branch, and Ingham, as well as Margaret Bayard Smith and her letter recipients, committed an etiquette crime that was not befitting their station. According to Day, they were traitors to their society and no better than Margaret.

For two years, Margaret Eaton was the subject of disdain and ostracism in Washington society. Her reputation and character had been damned. Instead of being shamed by the attention of men, she welcomed it, almost thrived on it. She was labeled a sinful woman who did not conform to the rules of being a lady and as a woman who tried to claim a place among the ladies of Washington, to which she did not belong.

No matter the reason for her behavior, which caused her to be treated with such antipathy, whether it was her unconventional upbringing, a strong will, and bad habits that had taken deep root despite a genteel education, being Andrew Jackson's favorite, or being Irish, Margaret was not accepted "across the entire spectrum of womanhood."⁵⁶ Her open and aggressive behavior was more that of a man's and that was criminal in the eyes of the ladies of Washington; therefore, she was treated as such.

In sum, Margaret Eaton's non-conformity to genteel rules in Washington society during the Jacksonian Era, coupled with her a lack of moral guidance while growing up caused her to become a woman whose reputation was deemed sexually and immorally loose. This ultimately led to a petticoat war between her and the elite wives of Washington. No matter how much she tried to fit in after she married John Eaton, she was not accepted into society. Emily Thornwell said it best that "it is a rare instance ... that a young female, who's habitually accustomed to society of a rude ... character, ever becomes dignified or graceful in her own manners."⁵⁷ In the end, Margaret Eaton Timberlake Eaton Buchignani was not dignified or graceful enough to ever fit into genteel Washington society due to her un-gentlewomanly behavior.

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