



Carl Sferrazza Anthony

Historian of the National First Ladies Library
Posted February 11, 2009 | 02:32 AM (EST)

Michelle Obama Breaks Precedent, Honors Tradition

In her third trip to a federal department of the executive branch of government, First Lady Michelle Obama came to the Interior Department on Monday, February 9.

Since Interior manages Native American affairs, the First Lady was welcomed with an "honor song" by an inter-tribal drum group, the "Black Bear Singers."

To "engulf all the goodness" around her, she was also wrapped in a royal purple shawl, appliquéd with native symbols, and made by Marianne Hannsom of the Kiowa tribe, according to presenter Nedra Darling, the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs.

Mrs. Obama's ongoing excursions to eventually visit each of the Cabinet departments to extend herself into the Washington community is unprecedented. Surprisingly, however, it echoes an earlier era when Cabinet members and the "ladies of the Cabinet" were the "official family" of a President and First Lady and regularly dined at each others' homes and even traveled together on official junkets that were part-vacation. In a time when the executive branch consisted of the State, War, Navy, Interior, Treasury, Justice and Agricultural departments, all clustered around the White House, several First Ladies took an active interest in the well-being of the clerks, typists and other Cabinet department employees.

Dolley Madison thought nothing of finding jobs for Quakers seeking work (although expelled from the sect for marrying "out" she remained close to many friends from her meeting-house).

War Secretary Edwin Stanton, Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase and Secretary of State William Seward were exasperated -- but dutiful -- when Mary Lincoln sent them notes by messenger directing them to hire needy men and women, white and black who needed jobs and appealed to her.

Frances Cleveland, concerned that many department clerks who worked all week were unable to attend her open-house receptions started holding them on Saturdays, so they could attend on their day off -- much to the disgust of some snobbish White House officials.

Eleanor Roosevelt held a series of lawn parties for thousands of "government girls" whose work she felt were unappreciated.

None took as active a role in the welfare of the Cabinet department employees as did Nellie Taft, who held the position exactly a century ago. Feeling that, as wife of the chief executive, she was somehow responsible for their well-being,

Mrs. Taft toured the various department work rooms and came back insisting to the President that the conditions were deplorable. In March 1912, he signed an executive order which demanded the first health and safety standards in the federal workplace -- fresh running water, open windows, heat, restrooms, and lunchrooms.

It was also the very first known instance of a First Lady involving herself in federal policy -- and owning up to it.

There is also a bit of irony in the location of the building the nation's first African-American First Lady visited on Monday. Perhaps as Mrs. Obama and her entourage entered and exited the 18th Street entrance of the Interior Department even they had little time to note that directly across the street was the entrance to Constitution Hall.

Exactly seventy years earlier, the great contralto opera singer Marian Anderson was denied use of the hall for a concert performance by its owners, the Daughters of the American Revolution, simply because she was an African-American.

And it was a First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, who helped facilitate Anderson's famous performance on Easter Sunday, 1939, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, where so many efforts associated with the Civil Rights Movement symbolically began -- and where Barack Obama opened his Inauguration festivities.