

# White House Tea and No Sympathy: The DePriest Incident

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*In June 1929, First Lady Lou Hoover invited the wives of U.S. Congressmen, including Mrs. Jesse DePriest, to tea at the White House. Mrs. DePriest was the wife of the first African-American elected to the U.S. Congress in the twentieth century, and her visit to the White House became quite controversial. Teachers might use this article as the foundation for lessons about American race relations, politics, or media of that era. Within the context of National History Day, the article could also be used in several different ways, for example, as the basis for discussion of the NHD theme for the year, critical analysis of sources, or research skills.—EDITOR*

## Introduction

In the early summer of 1929, citizens in the nation’s capital enjoyed reading about the White House activities of President Herbert Hoover and his wife, Lou Hoover, in their local newspaper. They learned that a “talking movie” was shown at the White House, that the president’s pets had acquired silver-plated nametags, and that a policy had been implemented to reduce the number of handshakes the president had to endure during public receptions. By July, the Hoovers no doubt sorely missed such whimsical coverage, when it was replaced by reports criticizing Mrs. Hoover for inviting an African-American woman to attend a White House tea.

Ordinarily, the First Lady’s activities would have been covered in the society news; in this case, however, Lou Hoover made front page headlines in newspapers across the country. Early in her husband’s administration, Mrs. Hoover planned to invite the wives of U.S. Congressmen to the White House, but she faced a dilemma. For the first time in decades, and for the first time ever outside the South, an African-American man had been elected to the U.S. Congress. Should she invite his wife, Mrs. Oscar DePriest, to tea at the White House along with the wives of the other Congressmen? She decided to do so, and Mrs. DePriest accepted the invitation and did indeed visit the White House, igniting a firestorm that demonstrated the sensitive and symbolic nature of the White House, as well as the delicate state of race relations in America on the cusp of the Depression.

## The Incident

Oscar DePriest was the first African-American elected as a U.S. Congressman since Reconstruction, and he was the first African-American ever elected to serve in the U.S. Congress from outside the South. A Republican from Chicago, DePriest began his term in March 1929, at the same time President Hoover started his term as president. It quickly became clear that a decision had to be made about what to do about Mrs. DePriest. While President and Mrs. Hoover tried to minimize political fallout, there does not seem to be any doubt that they would include Mrs. DePriest. It would be difficult to ignore White House traditions, so canceling the event was not really an option. Nor would the Hoovers snub Mrs. DePriest by excluding her.

Not since President Theodore Roosevelt invited African-American Booker T. Washington to a private White House dinner in 1901 had race relations touched the first family in such a personal way. President Roosevelt was severely criticized, particularly by the Southern press, for extending a dinner invitation to a Black man and thereby “degrading the White House.” While some people praised Roosevelt for breaking a barrier, the widespread negative publicity convinced him not to offer such an invitation again. Subsequent presidents followed suit. Seemingly, it was more politically expedient to avoid controversy than to court it, but tradition and chance collided during the first year of Herbert Hoover’s administration.

Considering how potentially volatile the situation was, however, much thought and planning went into how to make the event as successful as possible and to minimize negative reaction. Years later, Irvin

“Ike” Hoover (no relation to President Herbert Hoover), White House “chief usher”—supervisor of the White House household staff—described the incident in his published memoirs. He consulted with the First Lady’s social secretary, who insisted that Mrs. DePriest be invited as a matter of protocol. The only similar situation he could remember was the Booker T. Washington dinner, and “precedents were sought, but none could be found that definitely applied” for planning the details of the event. The president’s staff in the West Wing then discussed the upcoming event.

Finally, it was decided that the Congressional wives should be invited in four groups. Before the invitations were sent, Lou Hoover’s social secretary visited with a small number of the women to identify those who would not be offended to be at the same social function



***First Lady Lou Hoover. White House Historical Association (White House Collection).***

as Mrs. DePriest. They decided to invite Mrs. DePriest to the last of the four teas, for fear that doing otherwise might lead wives of Southern Congressman to boycott subsequent gatherings. One last preparation was needed: the morning of Mrs. DePriest's expected visit, White House security and doormen were alerted "to be careful when a colored lady should present herself and say she had an appointment with Mrs. Hoover, lest they create a scene by refusing her admittance."

On June 12, 1929, Mrs. Hoover received Mrs. DePriest and others in the White House Green Room. They then assembled for tea in the Red Room. Ike Hoover noted in his memoirs that "Mrs. DePriest conducted herself with perfect propriety. She really seemed the most composed one in the group." When she departed, there was "an admiration at the way she conducted herself" in a difficult situation.

Public reaction was less complimentary, however. Some southern newspaper editors accused Mrs. Hoover of "defiling" the White House. The Texas legislature went so far as to formally admonish her. President Hoover, in his memoirs, said that "the speeches of southern Senators and Congressmen... wounded [Mrs. Hoover] deeply." Mrs. Hoover's secretary, Ruth Fesler, later recalled that the first lady "stood her ground; she had done the right thing and she knew it."

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## Teaching Activity #1: Critical Examination of Sources

Most secondary sources that mention the DePriest incident draw upon two published primary sources: memoirs by Ike Hoover and Herbert Hoover. These two accounts of the DePriest incident contradict one another in many specifics, as readers will see when they look at the excerpts shown on Handout #1. The differences between the two accounts, as well as the nature of the two texts, provide teachers with an excellent opportunity to teach students about analyzing sources.

Teachers might begin by having their students read this article, including the two excerpts. Then, either in class discussion or as a written exercise, teachers can ask students to analyze both the sources and the incident. The first step would be to have students examine the sources and their limitations. Memoirs typically need to be used very carefully, and these two are certainly no exception. As is often the case with memoirs, both were written long after the event originally took place. Ike Hoover's memoirs were published nearly five years later, and Herbert Hoover published his memoirs more than two decades later. Questions arise about the accuracy of either man's memories of the event. Although less time had elapsed, Ike Hoover's memoirs are even more problematic than the former President's. They were published posthumously, and at the time of his death, the White House Chief Usher had not completed writing the section on the Hoover White House. Therefore, the publisher assembled his notes, edited them somewhat, and then printed them.

Students might consider questions such as the following: what role did each man play in the decision leading up to the event, and how was their involvement and personal perspective likely to influence their account? How was each affected by the incident, and how might that have shaped their memories of the specifics? Which account is more sympathetic to Mrs. Hoover, and why? What factors might have biased their views both at the time, and as they later wrote down their memories for publication? How might the editor/publisher of Ike Hoover's memoirs have introduced mistakes, or changed the story?

Next, the students might develop two separate summaries of the incident as reported by each of the two men, and then compare and contrast the two summaries. According to each account, why did this situation arise (historical context)? What were the issues related to inviting Mrs. DePriest to tea, or to planning the event? When was she invited, and who were the other women at the same tea? Who made the decisions, or who was involved in making the decisions? What decisions did they make? What "facts" are reported differently by the two men, and where do their accounts agree? Why do you think the two descriptions differ?

## Handout #1

# White House Tea

### ***Excerpt from President Herbert Hoover's memoirs:***

“In giving the usual teas for Congressmen’s wives, Mrs. Hoover insisted upon inviting [Mrs. DePriest] equally with the others. She was warned by some of her Congressional lady friends not to do it. The Negro Congressman [Oscar DePriest] did not particularly help matters by announcing to the press that his wife had received such an invitation. In consequence the southern press denounced this ‘defiling’ of the White House and the southern reporters lined up to watch the colored lady come and go, hoping to witness their prophecy that some Congressman’s wife would flop out. Mrs. Hoover had more sense than to give any such occasion for affront to her guest or to the White House. Nor did she wish to offend ladies from the South. Therefore, she divided her Congressional tea into different days and placed the Negro lady on the first day with ladies previously tested to their feelings.”

(Hoover, Herbert. *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Cabinet and Presidency*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1952.)

### ***Excerpt from Chief Usher Ike Hoover's memoirs:***

“Mrs. Hoover had decided to invite all the Congressional ladies to a series of teas and the families of the different Senators and members of the House were allotted to four groups and invited accordingly. ... The name of Mrs. DePriest was put aside for future consideration when these groups were made up. Everyone concerned realized that it was an unusual situation. Should Mrs. DePriest be included? The decision was postponed, for there was no precedent to go by. Thus the four parties to Congressional ladies came and went and Mrs. DePriest was invited to none of them.

In the meantime the discussion as to what to do continued. ... Mrs. Hoover seemed to have an open mind and was willing to be guided by whatever course was mapped out for her. However, when it was at last decided in the affirmative, she seemed hesitant and began to figure out how it could be done. After much discussion pro and con, she decided to give an extra party for Mrs. DePriest. A few chosen guests would be informed in advance of the situation.”

(Hoover, Irwin Hood. *Forty-Two Years in the White House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934.)

## Teaching Activity #2: Tying the Topic to the NHD Theme

Again, teachers might begin by having their students read this article and the two memoirs excerpts (Handout #1). Then they can use the DePriest incident as the foundation for introducing students to this year's National History Day theme, *Taking a Stand in History*. Students could consider whether Mrs. Hoover or Mrs. DePriest (or both) "took a stand" in this situation. They might also examine the impact of these two women's actions. Teachers might have a class discussion of the following types of questions:

- Why did Mrs. Hoover decide to invite Mrs. DePriest to the White House? In the presidential election, Republican Herbert Hoover gained important electoral votes from the South, usually a Democratic stronghold. The DePriest Tea incident hurt him, politically, in the South. Discuss how a seemingly simple social event can blow up into a small crisis for a president. Knowing the potential fallout, were the Hoovers taking a stand when inviting Mrs. DePriest? Why or why not?
- What risks did Mrs. Hoover take by inviting Mrs. DePriest. What steps did she take to minimize those risks? What consequences did Mrs. Hoover face?
- Similarly, could you say that Mrs. DePriest took a stand when she accepted Mrs. Hoover's invitation? Did it take courage for her to accept the invitation? Would there have been pressure from the African-American community to accept or to decline the invitation? What potential costs or risks did she face?
- How did this incident affect Mrs. Hoover or Mrs. DePriest? How did it affect Hoover's presidency or his political support? Race relations? American politics? Can you identify any other results of the DePriest incident? (Students will need to conduct additional research to do more than raise these questions and speculate about the answers.)

Teachers might end this lesson by having students discuss, and then write a few paragraphs about, how their own National History Day topics connect to the theme of *Taking a Stand in History*.



*The Red Room at the White House, as it looked during the Coolidge administration. White House Historical Association (White House Collection).*

### **Teaching Activity #3: Searching for Hard-to-Find Information**

Students will be likely to ask an obvious question when researching this topic: what about Mrs. DePriest? Unfortunately, she did not leave any written record that would reveal her thoughts, opinions, or feelings about the incident. In 2003, high school student Sarah Frese chose the DePriest incident as her National History Day topic. In her article on the next two pages, Ms. Frese describes her creative and persistent approach to finding whatever information she could.

Teachers might have students read Mr. Riley's article and Ms. Frese's companion piece, and then discuss her research method as it relates to their own NHD projects. Was Ms. Frese able to locate the kind of information she wanted? What seemed to work, and what did not work as well for her? More importantly, what are the gaps in their own projects? What questions would they like to answer but cannot seem to find relevant primary sources? Would they be able to try similar approaches with their projects? What other ideas does reading about Ms. Frese's experience give them? As follow up to the class discussion, teachers might ask students to write down their ideas in a "research plan" for their NHD projects.

# How I Located the DePriest Family for My National History Day Project

Sarah Frese, Student, Marshalltown (Iowa) High School

An important part of a good National History Day project is approaching the topic from all angles and examining the viewpoints of everyone involved. For my 2003 NHD project about the DePriest Tea Incident, however, I found that a critical piece of the puzzle was missing: Mrs. DePriest's perspective was completely absent from both primary and secondary sources. Here is the story of how I became a detective and eventually found the missing piece.

The two key players in the incident were Mrs. Lou Hoover and Mrs. Jessie DePriest. It was easy to learn about Mrs. Hoover's impressions and thoughts in her own words, since her papers are open to researchers at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa. Mrs. DePriest's opinions were much harder to find. A piece of the puzzle lost to history—or so it seemed. A good NHD project needs to have a balanced viewpoint, and mine could not have been balanced without Mrs. DePriest's voice. It was clear: I had to find it.

I went back to the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library again, and looked through Mrs. Hoover's clippings files to try to find any hint of where I might find Mrs. DePriest's point of view. While I read many things about how Congressman DePriest used this incident to further the cause of equality, Jessie's voice remained conspicuously absent.

I knew that the DePriests had lived in Chicago; maybe I could find their descendants still living there. So next, I looked up DePriest in the 2003 Chicago phonebook and found thirty-six DePriests listed. I sent each a letter describing my project, NHD, and why I needed their help.

After a week of waiting, I started to receive a variety of replies. I received a telephone call from a woman whose son had gone to college with Oscar DePriest III, Jessie's great-grandson. The caller said that her family was not related to Congressman DePriest by blood, but they had the same name because their ancestors had lived on the same plantation.

Then I received an amazing phone call from a Caucasian man named DePriest; he told me that his ancestors were the DePriests who had owned the plantation where Oscar DePriest's ancestors had been slaves. He explained that it had been common practice for slaves to take the name of the plantation owner like that. He said that this was his history and he was not proud of it, but it was what happened, and that we all need to know what happened in the past so that we do not repeat the mistakes in the future.

When I came home from basketball practice one evening, the blinking light on my answering machine signified a missed call; it also proved to be the turning point in my search for Jessie's opinions. The message was from a Mrs. Oscar DePriest, wife of a grandson of Congressman DePriest named Oscar DePriest II. She said that they were so excited to have received my letter and would love to help. Her husband was in hospice and could not speak to me, but she gave me the names of their two sons, Oscar III and Phillip, who were the executors of Jessie DePriest's estate.

After exchanging emails with Oscar DePriest III, I learned that all of Congressman DePriest's papers were in the estate. I had seen some photographs of the DePriests at the Herbert

Hoover Presidential Library on loan from the estate, and I asked for and received permission to use copies of some of those photographs in my NHD exhibit. I also helped connect the director of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library with the DePriest family so the library could fill in some of the missing pieces to this story from the Hoover administration.

This was all nice, but I still had not found Mrs. DePriest's point of view in her own words. Philip DePriest consented to an interview over the telephone in which we talked about his great-grandmother. He described her as a strong person who knew what she wanted, and who believed that she deserved to be treated the same as any other person.

After the interview, he sent me a copy of a clipping that quoted Jessie DePriest, in her own words. I had finally found it! In the newspaper clipping, Mrs. DePriest spoke of the wonderful time that she had at the White House and how Mrs. Hoover was the perfect hostess. I can picture her walking into the White House asking herself what all of the ruckus was about since she was just another Congressman's wife invited to tea.

Through this experience I met some amazing people. I got to know about two women whose place in history was overlooked or forgotten, and make the story public once again. While displaying my NHD exhibit at the White House Visitors Center in June 2003, I shared the story with many more people. One group that particularly impressed me was an African-American family. I started talking with the father, but then he asked me to wait a minute. He ran around the building and gathered his family so that they could hear a major part of their history that had been forgotten. Telling the story of the DePriest Tea Incident to that family while they videotaped and asked questions was the highlight of my day. It showed me that all of my hard work had been worthwhile!

*Sarah Frese is a senior at Marshalltown High School in Marshalltown, Iowa. She has participated in National History Day for the last five years, and has competed at the National Contest twice. Her project "The DePriest Tea Incident: ...a Most Unusual Affair" was awarded sixth place at the 2004 National Contest. Sarah also enjoys playing soccer, throwing pottery on the wheel, and reading.*