

Ulysses S. Grant

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site
7400 Grant Road
St. Louis, MO 63123



Julia Dent Grant



Introduction

Julia Dent Grant's legacy is still being explored. Although a typical woman of her era in some respects, she was extraordinary in many other ways. She had great strength of character, shared in the mixed fortunes of husband Ulysses S. Grant, promoted his welfare, loved and cared for her family, and enjoyed her responsibilities as first lady. She captured many of her life's experiences in writing *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant (Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant)*.

Childhood

Julia Boggs Dent was born January 26, 1826, in St. Louis, Missouri, the daughter of English-American parents Colonel Frederick Dent and Ellen Wrenshall Dent. Julia, the fifth of eight children and the first girl, felt she was pampered by her brothers, but believed she remained

unspoiled. Her energetic nature was matched by a firmness of will. Growing up at White Haven, she fished, rode horses, and played in the woods. Her playmates included enslaved children, who would eventually become her enslaved servants as adults.

Courtship and Marriage

As a schoolgirl, Julia declared that she would marry "a soldier, a gallant, brave, dashing soldier." After returning home from boarding school, she met that soldier in Ulysses S. Grant. Stationed at nearby Jefferson Barracks and invited to White Haven by his former West Point roommate, Fred Dent, Ulysses became a frequent visitor. He and Julia particularly

enjoyed walks and horseback rides together. Grant proposed in the spring of 1844, but their marriage was delayed until August 22, 1848 due to his service in the war with Mexico. Their 37 years of marriage were marked by love, trust, and respect, and Julia fondly recalled her husband as "the nicest and handsomest man I ever saw."

Motherhood



Julia, Ulysses Jr., and Fred Grant in 1854. (Leib Archives)

The Grants had four healthy children: Frederick, Ulysses Jr. (called Buck), Ellen

(called Nellie or Missy), and Jesse. Although Ulysses' army duty took them to the far corners of the nation, Julia returned home to White Haven for the birth of their first child and after the birth of Ulysses Jr. in Ohio. Their last two children were born at the White Haven estate after Grant's resignation from the army in 1854. Julia's love for her children was constant. She always made sure to broaden their horizons through education. The boys accompanied Ulysses to the front during the war, the children attended White House social functions, and were included on the Grants' around-the-world-tour.

Farming Life

By 1855, the Grants farmed 80 acres of land given to Julia as a wedding gift by her father. Ulysses also managed the rest of the White Haven estate. Those days were financially trying for the Grants, but Julia remained supportive of her hard-working husband. She considered herself "a splendid farmer's wife," raising chickens and even churning butter once. Except for making cake once a week, she left the

cooking and other housework to the slaves. During the Civil War, she served as the financial manager and agent for White Haven in her husband's absence. She leased sections of the farm, collected rent, and consolidated land titles according to Ulysses' instructions. Even through her husband's presidency and her many travels, she still considered the farm "home."

The General's Wife



Julia, Ulysses, and son Jesse at City Point, VA, in early 1865. (Library of Congress).

As it did for most Americans, the Civil War dramatically altered the Grants' lives. In 1861, Ulysses immediately left to serve in the Union Army, and his responsibilities kept him away from home for most of the war. Letters helped to ease the pain of separation, and Julia frequently travelled to her husband's headquarters, both alone and with the children. It is ironic to note that her slave, Jule, usually assisted with the children's care on such trips. The family's presence seemed to have a stabilizing influence upon Grant. With a strong desire to contribute to the war effort, Julia became a trusted confidant, and often offered suggestions, such as inviting President and First Lady Lincoln to visit them at the front. She even asked Ulysses (unsuccessfully) to let her act as an emissary for proposed peace talks with the Confederates in 1864.

First Lady

During Grant's two terms of office (1869-1877), Julia was an active participant in presidential matters. She attended Senate hearings, read through the president's mail, and met with cabinet members, senators, justices, and diplomats. She revelled in her role as hostess to the nation, and all accounts reflect the warmth and home-like atmosphere she brought to the White House. Indicative of this were

her afternoon teas and public receptions open to everyone, and the elaborate wedding held in the White House East Room for their daughter Nellie in 1874. Julia also became a grandmother for the first time while living there. She enjoyed her time so completely at the White House that she felt like a "waif" when they departed in 1877.

Retirement

In May 1877, the Grants embarked on a two-and-a-half year world tour. They met with both the dignitaries and common people of many countries, and visited many exotic points of interest. It was a welcomed break from the political turmoil of the presidency, and they were treated as American celebrities. Nearly one-third of Julia's memoirs are devoted to recollections of this trip, clearly a high

point of her life. She noted that in foreign countries Ulysses finally got the recognition and respect he deserved. Unfortunately, back in the United States, the Grants fell victim to a Wall Street financial scam that left them nearly penniless. Worse, Ulysses was diagnosed with inoperable throat cancer, and Julia's future welfare was cast into grave doubt.

Final Years

In a last effort to provide for his family, Ulysses S. Grant finished writing his memoirs in 1885, just before his death on July 23rd at Mt. McGregor, New York. The profits from Ulysses' memoirs left Julia a wealthy woman, and she chose to live in homes in New York City and Washington D.C. For the last 17 years of her life, Julia worked to promote and sustain the memory of her beloved husband. In 1897, she attended the dedication of Grant's Tomb in New York, with President William McKinley at her side. Her many friends and acquaintances included Jefferson Davis' wife Varina, Jane Stanford, and Theodore Roosevelt. Julia also planned to leave her memoirs for the world. Once completed, she had difficulty finding an editor with whom she could agree, and it was not until 1975 that they were published. She died from heart and kidney complications at the age of 76, and was laid to rest next to her husband in Grant's Tomb (General Grant National

Memorial). All four of her children outlived her, as did 12 of her 13 grandchildren.



Julia during the Grants' around-the-world tour, c. 1877. (Ohio Historical Society)

Further Reading

Grant, Julia Dent. *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant (Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant)*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975.
Ross, Ishbel. *The General's Wife: The Life of Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1959.