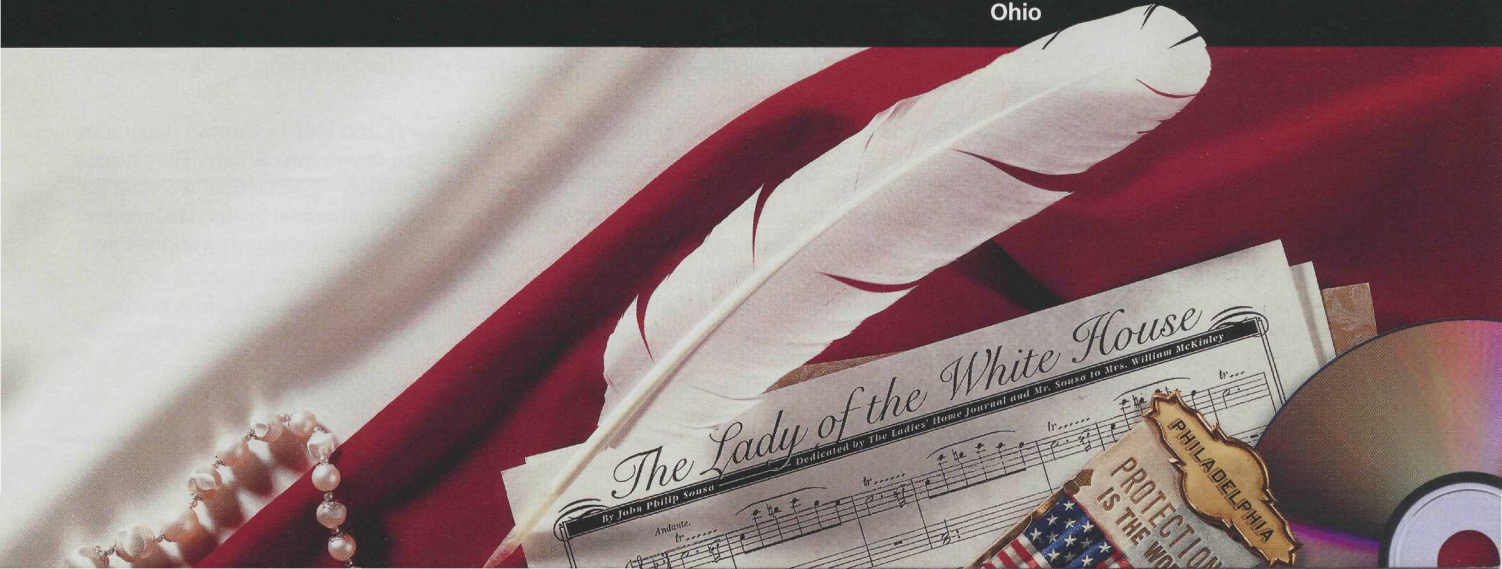


First Ladies

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Historic Site
National First Ladies' Library
Ohio





There is one secret and that is the power we all have in forming our own destinies. —Dolley Madison

Who is this entity that we now call “First Lady?” Since the time of the first President’s wife, Martha Washington, our society has struggled with what to call this uniquely American institution, using titles such as Presidentess, Mrs. President, Lady, Ladyship, First Ladyship, and finally, First Lady. Never declared an official governmental duty, the role of the First Lady has evolved into its own active, prominent position, as she performs duties and services recognized throughout the world.

The extent of the activities, power, and influence of any First Lady has been determined by each of these women and her spouse, based on the talent and desires of the First Lady and the political and social climate of the era.

First Ladies National Historic Site, established in 2000 as the 380th unit of the National Park Service, is a concept as well as a place. It is a site that commemorates the First Ladies’ contributions to American society, with the charge from Congress



The role of a First Lady has evolved over time—from official hostess to advocate of social cause and policy in the modern world (photo above).

NPS

Dolley Madison, 1804, was often referred to as Lady Presidentess (left).

WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION

“... to preserve and interpret the role and history of First Ladies for the benefit, inspiration, and education of the people of the United States.”



Grace Coolidge, 1924.
WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION

Who is She?

... this was the wife of the President and she took precedence over me; my personal likes and dislikes must be subordinated to the consideration of those things which are required of her.

—Grace Coolidge

More than 45 women have held the role of First Lady as of 2004. Not all those who served as First Ladies were spouses of the Presidents. If the President was a bachelor or widower, or if his wife was unable to perform the role, other female relatives or friends were called upon to carry out the First Lady’s official duties; thus there have been more First Ladies than Presidents.

Some First Ladies shunned public attention, others reveled in it. Many lived through immense personal tragedy, deaths of chil-

dren, illness, ridicule and suspicion. Others were showered in adoration and respect. Their various public personal styles included being aggressive, politically savvy, bright, articulate, passionately devoted to their favorite causes and to their husbands’ careers and their own careers, as well as being shy, private, intensely non-political, and aloof.

Whatever the American public’s sentiment was for each First Lady during her time in office, it seems that up to now the contributions of individual First Ladies were under-

valued, even by historians. With the establishment of the First Ladies National Historic Site, information about all the Presidents’ wives and hostesses is available in one place, for everyone to explore, research, understand, and appreciate. As you delve into the continuing stories of these remarkable American women you will find that their lives are a mirror of our country’s social and political growth and maturity, and especially a reflection of the changing roles of American women.

Director of Social Affairs

Skilled as a plantation manager, first First Lady Martha Washington (1789-1797) brought immediate structure to her role as a public hostess. Hostess first for widower Thomas Jefferson, Dolley Madison (1801-1817) made the role of the First Lady that of a much-loved celebrity at a time when women traditionally stayed quietly in the background. She later enlarged the social

[The role of the First Lady is]. . . much more of a 24-hour job than anyone would guess. Now that I realize what they've [former First Ladies] had to put up with, I have new respect and admiration for every one of them. —Betty Ford

duties to become a sophisticated personal lobbyist for her husband, especially during his 1812 re-election, and unwittingly made herself the standard-bearer for generations of her successors. Julia Tyler (1844-1845) and Sarah Polk (1845-1849) used the social arena to help ensure the success of their husbands' efforts to annex Texas and win the U.S.-Mexican War, respectively. In contrast, the belief

of Mary Lincoln (1861-1865) that her regal appearance, as well as that of the White House, would convey an image of Union Army strength, actually backfired in the Northern press during the Civil War. Likewise, the efforts of Elizabeth Monroe (1817-1825) to establish a new etiquette provoked diplomatic insults and State Department intercessions.

Presidential Liaison

Abigail Adams sat for this portrait sometime between 1830 and 1860.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS,
PORTRAIT COLLECTION



Other First Ladies found themselves to be important private Presidential liaisons and public symbols of strength, unity, comfort, and calm in times of crisis and war: Abigail Adams (1797-1801) as a political advisor on issues as important as potential war with France; Jane Pierce (1853-1857) in the midst of the bloody fighting between pro- and anti-slavery supporters in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act; Eliza Johnson (1865-1869) during her husband's impeachment trial; Lucretia Garfield (March-September, 1881) in the tragic months following the shooting, but preceding the death of her husband; Edith Wilson (1915-1921) when her husband suffered a stroke in the immediate post-World War I era; Lou Hoover (1929-1933) during the Great Depression;

Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981) at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis; Barbara Bush (1989-1993) during the Gulf War; Laura Bush (2001-present) in the days following the September 11, 2001 tragedy.

Some First Ladies have been drawn publicly into difficulties faced by Presidents, such as Julie Grant (1869-1877) and Florence Harding (1921-1923), who were personally implicated in scandals of their husbands' administrations.

Policy Advocate

A challenge for most of the First Ladies was balancing their and their spouses' public and personal lives. Many chose to concentrate their energy on maintaining their domestic and family responsibilities. Others took up the cause of the political and social advancement of women. The role that created the most frequent public dialogue about First Ladies was that of policy advocate.

Martha Washington (1789-1797) started the tradition of the First Lady championing a cause of public responsibility with her adoption of improving the condition of the American Revolutionary War veterans.

Abigail Adams (1797-1801) was the first First Lady to be a strong political partner to her husband. Many First Ladies played a pivotal position as sounding board and advisor to her husband on the activities of the Presidency.

First Ladies came from varying backgrounds and education. As time went on, it was evident that formal education became an essential asset in the role of policy advocate and independent thinker. Abigail Fillmore (1850-1853), a teacher, was the first First Lady to make her own living. Lou Hoover (1929-1933) was the first woman in the United States to earn a college degree in geology. She promot-



Lou Hoover, 1924.
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ed the idea that young women should be physically active outdoors and served as a national president of the Girl Scouts of America.

Eleanor Roosevelt,
1949.

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Political Reformer

I am in a position where I can do the most good to help the most people. —Eleanor Roosevelt

Eleanor Roosevelt (1933-1945) inspired women of all ages to reach beyond accepted norms. She was a social reformer, political activist, and successful businesswoman, who fought racism, sexism, and poverty. Most of the First Ladies influenced American women and their struggle for independence.

Women such as Ellen Wilson (1913-1914), Lady Bird Johnson (1963-1969), Betty Ford

(1974-1977), and Hillary Clinton (1993-2001) were often drawn into debate. They helped push legislation—government working conditions, environmental protection, gender equality, and health care—to various stages of success.

Keeper of “the People’s House”

The White House is a government building and museum—it is also a private home to Presidential families. First Ladies have been charged with appropriately balancing and maintaining the divide between public and private use.

As mothers who preferred focusing on their large families, Lucy Hayes (1877-1881), Caroline Harrison (1889-1892), and Edith Roosevelt (1901-1909) nevertheless undertook public projects for the historic preservation

of elements of “the people’s house.” Grace Coolidge (1923-1929) successfully lobbied Congress to provide the first bill that encouraged public donations for the mansion. Jacqueline Kennedy (1961-1963) created the White House Historical Association, a federal curatorial position, and the first official publication about the mansion. Pat Nixon (1969-1974) accelerated antique acquisition for the permanent collection. She initiated guided tours for visitors with physical disabilities, including the blind, and offered tours with interpreters for people who are non-



Lucy Hayes,
1881.

WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL
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English-speaking. She also introduced evening holiday tours (for those unable to visit during daytime working hours) and seasonal garden tours for all.

Helpmate and Confidant

Perhaps the most consistent role played by all First Ladies has been that of a partner who could protect the President from potential troubles, offer their opinions, and provide a sounding board. In the trying days when her husband decided to use the atomic bomb, Bess Truman (1945-1953) drew close to support him. Nellie Taft (1909-1913) acted as her husband’s speech editor and joined his conferences with the Speaker of the House. Voicing beliefs of her faith that encouraged missionaries to work in foreign countries, Ida McKinley (1897-1901) may have influenced her husband’s decision to retain the Philippines after the Spanish-American War.

Many First Ladies have safeguarded the personal well-being and public reputation of their husbands. Following her husband’s heart attack, Mamie Eisenhower (1953-1961) vetoed over-extension of his speaking schedule and insisted on adherence to a strict diet.

In reaction to an assassination attempt, surgery, and other illnesses faced by her husband, Nancy Reagan (1981-1989) sought to personally protect him and guard against political exploitation. Frances Cleveland (1886-1889; 1893-1897) was instrumental in the elaborate strategy to keep her husband’s cancer surgery from public disclosure at a time of labor unrest and financial insecurity.

Not all of the First Ladies were successful in such efforts. Abigail Fillmore (1850-1853) urged her husband to veto the Fugitive Slave Bill—or lose his northern Whig Party base. Louisa Adams (1825-1829), knowing that her husband’s re-election would be the first to be decided by popular vote, advised him to campaign actively in cities where she had already cultivated support. In both instances the Presidents did not take the advice. In both instances the First Ladies proved right in their judgements.

I hope someday someone will take time to evaluate the true role of the wife of the President, and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and the contributions she makes.

—Harry S Truman

Insight into American History

While their choices may have been guided by political considerations and the evolving role of women in American society, whatever roles First Ladies have assumed, each has contributed to the larger history of the American Presidency in her own way.

The early First Ladies remind us of the struggles of our newly formed country, the frontier character, optimism, and strength as we developed our own identity. The modern-age First Ladies touch us with our grandparents', parents', and our own coming-of-age, and recollect the world and national events that may still evoke strong personal feelings. First Ladies National Historic Site weaves their lives through our country's

entire legacy. Reading or listening to the stories of the First Ladies puts a feminine face on knowledge and insight about the events of United States history. This historical site has no end point—each future President will bring us a new First Lady or Hostess, and some day, First Gentleman or Host.

Whether you are a newcomer to learning about American First Ladies, or a long-time historian and student of American politics, you will encounter an inspiring, human chronicle of our country's evolution at the First Ladies National Historic Site—a place of important American history.



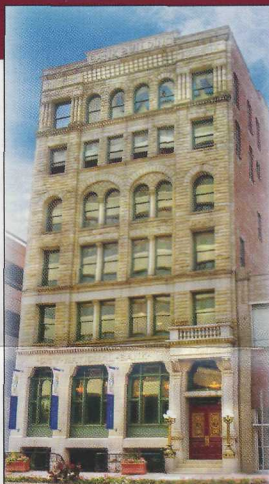
Ida McKinley posed for this portrait in the late 1860s.

FIRST LADIES' LIBRARY
COLLECTION

Visiting the Site



Saxton McKinley House



Education and Research Center

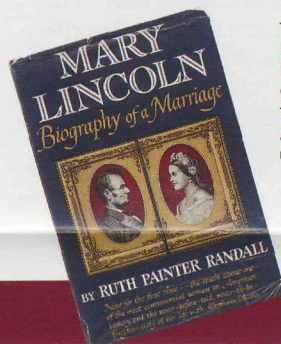
First Ladies National Historic Site features the former home of First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley. William and Ida McKinley lived here during the 14 years he served in Congress. The Saxton McKinley House (commonly called the Saxton House), 331 Market Avenue South, is restored to the McKinley era.

The Education and Research Center (ERC), 205 Market Avenue South, is one block north of the Saxton House in the former City National Bank Building. ERC facilities include a First Ladies' research library, exhibits, a small theater for public presentations, and areas for conferences, seminars, and workshops.

Guided tours, which begin at the ERC and continue at the Saxton House, are led by

docents dressed in First Ladies' period costumes. Highlights include First Ladies' exhibits and historic McKinley era furnishings. Admission: \$7 adults, \$6 seniors, \$5 students. Contact the Library for details about tours.

Accessibility The Saxton House and ERC are accessible for visitors in wheelchairs.



The Education and Research Center houses a growing collection of more than 3,500 books and printed materials.

FIRST LADIES' LIBRARY COLLECTION

A Partnership

First Ladies National Historic Site is a partnership between the National Park Service and the National First Ladies' Library. The Library, established as a nonprofit organization in 1996, educates people about the contributions of all First Ladies and other notable women in American history. The Library's interpreters and educators provide a variety of tours, programs, and classes at the park and in local schools.

The operations at the Saxton House and the Education and Research Center serve the on-site educational function. The National First Ladies' Library also maintains an electronic virtual library.

Library Accomplishments

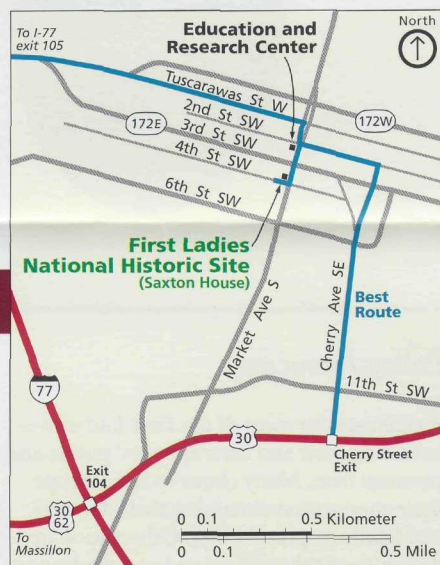
- Restoration of the home of First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley.
- Production of permanent and changing exhibits at the Saxton House to interpret the lives and contributions of First Ladies.
- Refurbished an historic bank building, adapting it to include study rooms, exhibits, a theater, and a modern electronic research library dedicated to the history of First Ladies.
- Development of a complete, annotated bibliography of First Ladies.
- Production of educational units and study guides for students, grades K-12.

For More Information

National First Ladies' Library
205 Market Avenue South
Canton, OH, 44702-2107
330-452-0876
www.firstladies.org

First Ladies National Historic Site
8095 Mentor Avenue
Mentor, OH 44060-5753
440-974-2993
www.nps.gov/fila

First Ladies National Historic Site is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities visit www.nps.gov.



Getting Here/Parking The National First Ladies' Library is in downtown Canton, Ohio. Free parking is available behind the Saxton House or at our gated lot on the corner of Market Avenue South and 3rd Street SW (entrance from Market Avenue South). For information about parking call 330-452-0876.