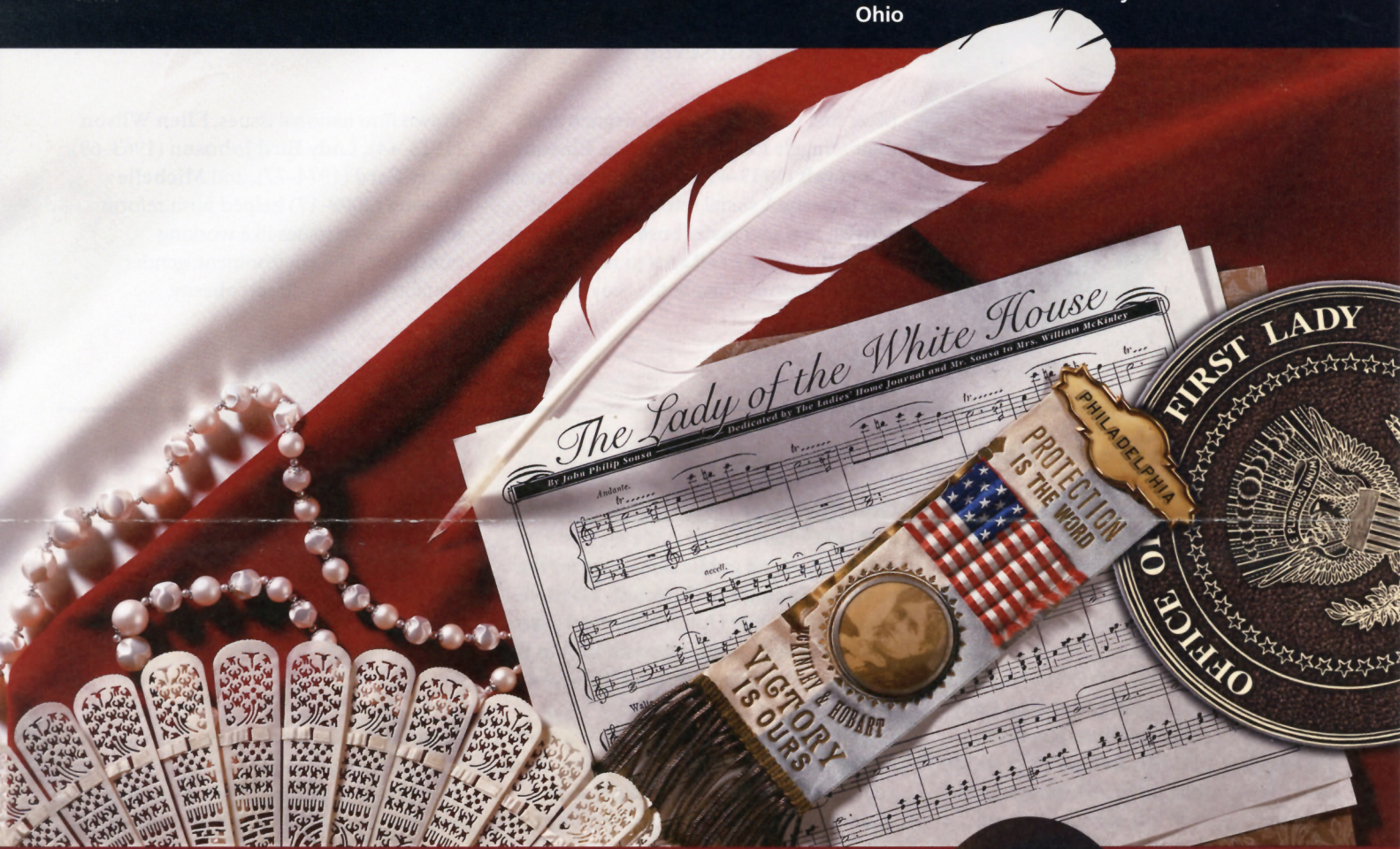


First Ladies

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site
National First Ladies Library & Museum
Ohio



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

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a first lady of the United States? Have you thought about what a first lady does—or how this role has changed over the centuries?

At First Ladies National Historic Site, you can explore these questions and more. Established in 2000 to

commemorate all the first ladies' contributions to the nation, the park offers everyone opportunities to research, understand, and appreciate those who have served in this important role. Through their stories of hardship, perseverance, despair, courage, family, independence, and more, you will find there's much to discover about the first ladies and their vital connections to US history.



Dolley Madison
portrait by Gilbert
Stuart, 1804
WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION / WHITE
HOUSE HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

For over 200 years, first ladies have been inspiring the nation and the world. How do the first ladies inspire you?



Grace Coolidge
portrait by
Howard C.
Christie, 1924
WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION /
WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

Who Is a First Lady?

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

Since the first lady role began in the late 1700s, society has struggled with what to call this unique position, using titles like Presidentress, Mrs. President, Lady, Ladyship, First Ladyship, and finally First Lady.

Martha Washington (1789–97) first held this role, as she was the wife of the first US president, but not all first ladies are presidents' wives. A president may be a bachelor or a widower, or the president's wife may be unable or unwilling to perform the duties. In these cases, other female

relatives or friends have been called upon to carry out the role; thus, the nation has had more first ladies than presidents. At least 57 people have held the role of first lady.

The first lady and the president determine the extent of her activities, power, and influence. These are based on her talents and desires as well as the era's political and social climate. First ladies' public personal styles vary from bright, articulate, aggressive, or politically active to aloof, private, shy, or non-political. Some shun public attention;

others revel in it. Their education levels vary, increasing over time as more opportunities have become available to women. Some have been devoted to their families, favorite causes, careers, or husbands' careers. Many have endured personal trials due to illness, ridicule, suspicion, or the deaths of their children.

Never declared an official government post, the first lady's role has evolved into active and prominent duties that are recognized and valued worldwide.

What Does a First Lady Do?

Director of Social Affairs

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

Martha Washington brought immediate structure to her role as a public host. **Dolley Madison** (1801–17) became the host for widower president Thomas Jefferson, then for her husband James when he became president. Turning the role into that of a much-loved celebrity, Dolley expanded social duties into sophisticated lobbying,

especially during James's 1812 re-election. Unwittingly, she set the standard for future first ladies. **Julia Tyler** (1844–45) and **Sarah Polk** (1845–49) also leveraged the social arena, in particular to help ensure their husbands' successes in annexing Texas and winning the US-Mexican War, respectively. Not all first ladies succeed in social affairs.

Elizabeth Monroe (1817–25) tried to establish a new etiquette, but this provoked diplomatic insults and State Department intercessions. **Mary Lincoln** (1861–65) believed her regal appearance, and that of the White House, would convey Union strength during the Civil War, but this backfired in the Northern press.

Symbols of Strength



Laura Bush
White House
photograph,
2005
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS /
KRISIANNE JOHNSON

In times of crisis or war, some first ladies are noted as public symbols of strength, unity, comfort, and calm: **Dolley Madison** during the War of 1812 when she stayed at the White House as the British approached until a portrait of George Washington was removed to safety, **Eliza Johnson** (1865–69) during her husband Andrew's impeachment, **Lucretia Garfield** (March–September 1881) when an assassin's bullet mortally wounded her husband James, **Edith Wilson** (1915–21) after her husband Woodrow suffered a stroke while in office, **Barbara Bush** (1989–93) during the Gulf

War, and **Laura Bush** (2001–09) during September 11, 2001. A few first ladies have been drawn publicly into the difficulties presidents face. **Julia Grant** (1869–77) and **Florence Harding** (1921–23) were personally implicated in scandals linked to their husbands' administrations. Years after defending her husband Richard during the Watergate scandal, **Pat Nixon** (1969–74) said, "All lives have triumphs and tragedies, laughter and tears, and mine has been no different. What really matters is whether, after all of that, you remain strong and a comfort to your loved ones."

Policy Advocate

Many first ladies have looked after domestic and family responsibilities or have tried to balance their public and personal lives. Many have also taken up social and political causes or the role of policy advocate.

By adopting the cause of improving the conditions of American Revolutionary War veterans, **Martha Washington** started the traditional role of the first lady as champion for a cause of public responsibility. A strong political partner, **Abigail Adams** (1789–97)

advised her husband John on issues like potential war with France. **Hillary Clinton** (1993–2001) pushed publicly for health care, education, and women's equality.

Not all first ladies were successful in such efforts. **Abigail Fillmore** (1850–53) urged her husband Millard to veto the Fugitive Slave Bill or risk losing his northern Whig Party base. Knowing her husband John Quincy's re-election would be the first decided by popular vote, **Louisa Adams**



Hillary Clinton
White House
photograph,
1997
WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION

(1825–29) advised him to campaign actively in cities where she had cultivated support. Neither president heeded the first lady's advice—and their judgment proved correct.

Social Reformer

Eleanor Roosevelt portrait by Granville Douglas Chandor, 1949

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

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Most first ladies influenced women and their struggle for independence. Eleanor Roosevelt (1933–45) fought sexism, racism, and poverty. A social reformer, political activist, and successful businesswoman, she inspired women of all ages to reach beyond accepted norms. First ladies are often

drawn into national issues. Ellen Wilson (1913–14), Lady Bird Johnson (1963–69), Betty Ford (1974–77), and Michelle Obama (2009–17) helped push reform legislation on issues like working conditions, the environment, gender equality, and childhood obesity.

Keeper of “the People’s House”

The White House serves as a government building, museum, and private home to the president’s family. First ladies have been charged with balancing and maintaining the divide between the public and private uses of “the People’s House.”

In addition to raising large families, Lucy Hayes (1877–81), Caroline Harrison (1889–92), and Edith Roosevelt (1901–09) undertook public projects for the historic preservation of White House elements.

Grace Coolidge (1923–29) successfully lobbied Congress to provide the first bill that encouraged public donations for the mansion. Jacqueline Kennedy (1961–63) created the White House Historical Association, a federal curatorial position, and the first official publication about the mansion.

Pat Nixon accelerated antiques acquisition for the permanent collection. She initiated guided tours for visitors with physical disabilities and offered tours by interpreters



Jacqueline Kennedy portrait by Aaron Shikler, 1970

WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION / WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

for non-English speakers. She also introduced evening holiday tours for those unable to visit during daytime working hours and seasonal garden tours for all.

Presidential Partner

Perhaps the most consistent role undertaken by all first ladies has been partner to the president—offering opinions, a sounding board, advice on activities, and protection from potential troubles.

Helen Taft (1909–13) was her husband William’s speech editor and joined his conferences with the House speaker. Ida McKinley (1897–1901) may have influenced her husband William’s decision to retain the Philippines after the Spanish-American War.

Many first ladies have safeguarded their husbands’ public reputations. Florence Harding worked to protect her husband Warren from political and personal scandals. Bess Truman (1945–53) closely supported her husband Harry in the trying days after he used the atomic bomb. Frances Cleveland (1886–89; 1893–97) was instrumental in an elaborate strategy to prevent the public disclosure of her husband Grover’s cancer surgery during a time of national labor unrest and financial insecurity.

The president’s personal care has also been a primary part of the first lady’s role. After her husband Dwight’s heart attack, Mamie Eisenhower (1953–61) vetoed overextending his speaking schedule and insisted on his adherence to a strict diet. In response to an assassination attempt, surgery, and other illnesses faced by her husband Ronald, Nancy Reagan (1981–89) sought to protect him personally and guard against political exploitation.

The first lady role is really difficult. It has no job description. . . . You have to create it for yourself.

—Hillary Clinton

Insight into American History

First ladies’ lives mirror the nation’s political and social growth. The early first ladies remind us of the country’s early struggles, the optimism of its expansion and growth, and the strength of the union as the United States developed its national identity. The modern first ladies connect us to pivotal events that have shaped our times—and those that will shape the times after us. Their choices may have been guided by political considerations or by the evolving role of women in society. But each first lady’s contributions to the nation, the presidency, and history are as individual as the first ladies themselves.

First Ladies National Historic Site weaves the lives and legacies of all the first ladies through the fabric of the nation’s history. Whether you are new to learning about the first ladies, a longtime historian, or a student of history or politics, you can explore an inspiring chronicle at the park. Discover the stories, unique perspectives, and insights of the first ladies—a valued part of the nation’s heritage that will continue with each future first partner.



Ida Saxton McKinley, late 1860s

FIRST LADIES LIBRARY & MUSEUM COLLECTION

Visit a Small Park with a Big Story



Ida Saxton McKinley House

NPS



Visitor center

NPS

More Information

First Ladies National Historic Site
205 Market Ave. South
Canton, OH 44702-2107
330-452-0876
www.nps.gov/fila

Follow us on social media. Use the official NPS App to guide your visit.

First Ladies National Historic Site is one of over 430 parks in the National Park System. Learn about national parks at www.nps.gov.

Visitor Center

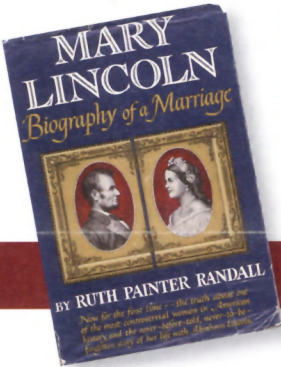
205 Market Ave. South
Start at the visitor center (free). The first floor has a small museum and park store. Additional exhibits are on the lower level and second floor, which also has a research library and theater.

Ida Saxton McKinley House

331 Market Ave. South
One block south of the visitor center is the former home of First Lady Ida McKinley, where the McKinleys lived for many years. Guided tours begin at the visitor center. Highlights include historic McKinley-era furnishings and a few of their original belongings. Visit the park

website for current information on fees, hours, and tour times.

Accessibility We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to the visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check the park website. The visitor center and Ida Saxton McKinley House are wheelchair-accessible. Service animals are allowed.



The visitor center houses a growing collection of over 3,500 books and other materials.

FIRST LADIES LIBRARY & MUSEUM COLLECTION

Regulations For firearms and other regulations check the park website.

Parking The park is in downtown Canton, Ohio. Limited free parking is available behind the Ida Saxton McKinley House and in a lot on the corner of Market Ave. South and 3rd St. SW. For more parking information call the park.

National Park Foundation. Join the park community. www.nationalparks.org

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A Partnership

First Ladies National Historic Site is a partnership between the National Park Service and the National First Ladies Library & Museum. Established as a nonprofit in 1996, the National First Ladies Library & Museum educates visitors about the contributions of all the first ladies and tells the story of American history uniquely through women’s eyes. The organization provides exhibits, educational programs, and tours, as well as national outreach to elevate awareness of First Ladies National Historic Site. Programs educate children and adults across the country about our first ladies. The organization also maintains first lady biographies and an online catalog of resource materials. The library is available for research requests by appointment.

National First Ladies Library & Museum Accomplishments

- Restored the home of First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley, including permanent exhibits to showcase her life
- Restored a historic bank building, now the visitor center, which houses a museum gallery, Victorian theater, research library, and children’s activity areas
- Developed full biographies of all first ladies and an online resource guide for research
- Stewards a collection of over 5,000 first lady artifacts

www.firstladies.org

