

Introduction

I live a very dull life here and know nothing that passes in the town. I never go to any public place . . . Indeed, I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else. There is certain bounds for me which I must not depart from . . . and as I cannot do as I like, I am obstinate, and stay at home a great deal.

— Martha Washington, October 23, 1789¹

I have a forum. I won't have it always. The time is now.

— Laura Bush, 2001²

While researching my book *Homes and Libraries of the Presidents* I realized that, while the focus was on presidents, at the same time I was studying their wives, those women who did not seek nor run for office but were, through marriage, destined to become our nation's First Ladies. Who were they? What were their backgrounds? What influence, if any, had they on their husbands as these men made often monumental decisions? The answer to the last question may never be known, although history has speculated that in some cases the influence of these women was significant. The other questions, however, are more easily answered.

After all, many of the residences included in *Homes and Libraries of the Presidents* belonged to a **couple**. Mount Vernon was the home of George **and** Martha Washington. Lawnfield was the residence of James **and** Lucretia Garfield and Spiegel Grove was the residence of Rutherford **and** Lucy Hayes. The ladies made them homes, whether the magnificent Mount Vernon in Virginia, the rustic ranch house of Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson in the Texas hill country or the modest home of Harry and Bess Truman in mid-America. All of these structures reflect the honest American values of their occupants — hard work, respect, marital devotion and deep, abiding love.

Homes of the First Ladies

By visiting them, we may be able to better understand the men who attained America's highest political office and the women who stood by their sides as they led our nation through years of struggle and growth to America's pre-eminence in the world. Together.

First Ladies, then, have been and continue to be important. Edith Mayo, Curator Emeritus of the National Museum of American History, once said, "She represents the kinder, gentler side of the presidency, and I think she has always been a voice in the country for those who don't have a political voice."³ That may be true of more recent First Ladies although it was not always so. After all, President Martin Van Buren didn't even mention his wife and family in his autobiography! Nowadays presidential wives are in the news on a daily basis, and they speak out on issues, formulate fashion and at times cause controversy. Over two centuries have passed between the rather plaintive quotation of Martha Washington and the forceful comment of Laura Bush as she vowed to use the stature and power of her unofficial position to speak out on issues of importance.



First Ladies. What an interesting, eclectic group — shy or ebullient, cosmopolitan or countrified, healthy or infirm, wealthy or poor, well-educated or unschooled, ambitious or passive; each has represented, in her own way, a social stratum of the nation and the political beliefs of her husband, at least publicly. It's impossible to categorize them easily and ill-advised to try to do so as expectations and opportunities have significantly changed over the last two centuries. Early First Ladies, although widely admired, functioned mostly in the background and would undoubtedly be shocked by the attention, adulation, fame and, certainly, the outspokenness of their modern White House counterparts.

These women might even be surprised by the unofficial title now in common use. Martha Washington was referred to as "Lady Washington" by General Washington's troops during the Revolutionary War, a sobriquet carried over from our British royal heritage, a sincere mark of respect that continued through Washington's presidency, although the term made Martha uncomfortable. Her own use of the term "first lady" in a letter to a friend, inadvertently prophetic, bore fruit in 1849 when President Zachary Taylor, at the death of Dolley Madison, eulogized, "She will never be forgotten because she was truly our First Lady for a half-century."⁴ Taylor's remark was the first recorded use of the term which, thereafter, disappeared until 1860 when *Leslie's*

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Illustrated Newspaper referred to Harriet Lane, President Buchanan's niece and White House hostess, as "First Lady." The publication may have simply intended to make a distinction between a president's wife and another person who served as hostess but the term was used, only infrequently, until 1877 when reporter Mary Clemmon Ames referred to Lucy Hayes as "First Lady" at the inauguration of husband Rutherford B. Hayes. Somehow, that time, the term caught on to become a fixture of American lexicon, the commonly accepted title for the wife of the President of the United States.

Author Kati Marton once wrote:

*The First Lady is one of our most cherished institutions. We're a deeply traditional people, and maybe out of some residual nostalgia for the monarchy that we fought so hard to shed, we really set up the White House and the presidency as sort of semi-monarchical.*⁵

That's true considering the American fascination with royalty and celebrity as exemplified by our interest in, for example, princesses Grace and Diana, and with such entertainment royalty as Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Elvis the King. There is, of course, commercial royalty as exemplified by king- and queen-sized beds, princess phones, Burger King and Dairy Queen.

There is no constitutional job description for the First Lady as it is not an elected position. In fact, women were not granted suffrage until 1920, during the presidency of Woodrow Wilson, when Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment that granted women the right to vote.

Since 1789, when George Washington became our first president, the role of the First Lady has evolved. Prior to the Civil War, wives (including a president's wife) were expected to remain in the background, voices and opinions stifled; content, perhaps, to act as a proper eighteenth- or nineteenth-century helpmeet — docile, dutiful — and silent. Those early First Ladies were, in fact, highly diverse individuals. Before her marriage to George Washington, Martha Dandridge Custis was a wealthy plantation owner and slave holder in her own right. Abigail Adams was a prolific writer and documentarian of the colonial social and political era. Elizabeth Monroe, in Paris with her husband, James, then ambassador to France, was instrumental in saving the Marquis de Lafayette's wife from the guillotine. Sarah Polk acted as her husband's private secretary, confidante and political advisor. Dolley

Madison, raised as a modest Quaker, became the nation's arbiter of taste and fine living, while Margaret Taylor, annoyed that husband Zachary ran for the presidency in the first place, demonstrated her independence by refusing to participate in the social milieu as First Lady. She remained in the family living quarters, eschewed all social responsibilities and left the White House only to attend church.

Things changed around the time of the Civil War. With the invention of the telegraph and improvements in photography, newspaper coverage of the war was more timely and extensive, leading to increased public interest in current events, especially political matters. The personal lives of the presidents and First Ladies became more interesting and widely known; the beliefs, fashions and hairstyles of the First Ladies, for example, became popular topics of conversation. There were early twinges of interest in women's rights as exemplified by such pioneer activists as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton and others. It was not until the twentieth century, however, that Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft, Edith Wilson and Florence Harding began to shatter the mold of First Lady reticence which led to the social activism of Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter and Hillary Clinton. Media coverage — newspapers, magazines, radio and especially television — thrived on presidential pictures, personalities and peccadilloes. The personal lives of the President and First Lady became public property.

As a group, our First Ladies have only one thing in common — marriage to a President of the United States. The single exception to this generalization in this book is bachelor President James Buchanan's niece and ward, Harriet Lane, who served as his White House hostess and full social partner. Also, it would be proper to recognize that four wives listed here — Martha Jefferson, Rachel Jackson, Hannah Van Buren and Ellen Arthur — passed away before their husbands' presidencies began. While technically not First Ladies, it is clear that their early influence on their husbands was profound.

For all their differences, there are similarities between some First Ladies. For example, Martha Washington spent many winters with her husband in military encampments, Julia Grant and Lucy Hayes spent a great deal of time at military camps during the Civil War, and Eleanor Roosevelt, Pat Nixon, Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush visited troops stationed near combat zones in Europe, the South Pacific, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. Mary Lincoln and Jacqueline Kennedy experienced, first-hand, the horror of

presidential assassination. Lucretia Garfield, Ida McKinley, Anna Harrison, Margaret Taylor, Florence Harding and Eleanor Roosevelt were widowed when their husbands died in office.

Letitia Tyler, Caroline Harrison and Ellen Wilson died while residing in the White House. Julia Tyler, Frances Cleveland and Edith Wilson married sitting presidents and Barbara Bush and Abigail Adams share the honor of producing sons who would assume the same high office once held by their husbands.

Most First Ladies have been admired, some revered — and several vilified. Mary Lincoln, Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan and Hillary Clinton absorbed more than their share of criticism, deserved or not — for being overly active, overbearing, demanding, political or extravagant. The most maligned was undoubtedly Mary Lincoln, the object of a hate campaign so vicious that, following President Lincoln's death, her behavior became so erratic that she was committed to a mental institution for a brief period.

Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton were heavily criticized for their social activism, while Sarah Polk, Mary Lincoln and Helen Taft, albeit behind the scenes, were equally active in promoting (some say pushing) their husbands' political careers. Conversely, several First Ladies were passive, confined to inactive roles. Eliza Johnson, Letitia Tyler and Ida McKinley were unable to perform many duties expected of First Ladies due to illness.

First Ladies are, then, a disparate group, and a fascinating one. Excepting Sarah Polk, Mary Lincoln, Helen Taft and Hillary Clinton who harbored dreams of political grandeur, or those who married sitting presidents, the others hardly visualized residence in the White House. They were young women who married their husbands then working as farmers, attorneys, military officers, tailors, newspaper publishers, schoolteachers, haberdashers, congressmen, government bureaucrats or mining engineers. One even was working as a motion-picture actor.

By studying First Ladies, we also study presidents, for their influence on one another was significant. Sarah Polk was her husband's private secretary, and Eliza Johnson spent her newlywed days in husband Andrew's tailor shop, where she helped tutor the poorly educated young man in reading and mathematics. Eleanor Roosevelt became husband Franklin's eyes and ears — and legs — when he was struck with polio, and newlywed Lady Bird Johnson used an inheritance to finance Lyndon's first campaign for Congress.

Rosalynn Carter and Hillary Clinton were their husbands' full political partners, and Edith Wilson was nicknamed "The Presidentress" when she became a conduit between her husband, the Congress and the nation after her husband became physically incapacitated by a severe stroke.



In 1960, President Harry S Truman wrote, "I hope someday someone will take time to evaluate the true role of the wife of a president, and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and the contributions she makes."⁶

It was not until 1995, however, that former Canton, Ohio, school teacher Mary Regula, unable to find good reference material about First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, realized how little the nation knew about First Ladies. Thereupon, she decided that America needed an organization devoted to the study and historical significance of the nation's First Ladies and founded the National First Ladies' Library, its purpose to compile a bibliography of works on First Ladies.

By 1998, a web site featuring the bibliography was complete. First Lady Hillary Clinton honored its dedication by writing:

At this exciting time in our history, as we look forward to a new century and the next millennium, the National First Ladies' Library preserves a very special part of our nation's political and social history. The electronic library allows you to browse through a comprehensive bibliographic database exhibiting the enormous contributions made by forty-three remarkable women . . . The items contained in this library help us to understand our nation's past and, with that understanding, to meet the future with confidence.⁷

At the same time, it was clear that the organization needed a larger physical location. Providentially, the Canton, Ohio, family home of former First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley, owned by the National Park Service, had office space available. The National First Ladies' Library had found a home. A major refurbishing effort was undertaken; the interior décor was brilliantly recreated to represent the Victorian period of the Saxton family residency (see page 145) with several rooms set aside for exhibits on First Ladies — and the William McKinleys who had resided in the house for many years following their marriage.

The library venture was so successful that it led almost immediately to further expansion. Thus, in September 2003, the National First Ladies'

Library Education and Research Center (see page 147) opened in a seven-story building only one block from the Saxton McKinley home that remains open as a house museum. At the dedication of the Education Center, as she witnessed her dream come true, president and founder Mary Regula said:

Now, with this state-of-the-art research facility and library, and a beautifully restored Victorian museum, someone searching for a role model, researching a speech or defending a maligned First Lady has a place to come to document the truth. This will become a home for scholars, schoolchildren, authors and arm-chair historians alike to finally fill the void in American history.⁸

The guest of honor at the dedication was First Lady Laura Bush who remarked:

As a former teacher and librarian and a First Lady, I am glad to be here to commemorate the opening of this center for history, 'her-story' and for learning . . . This is a national archive which chronicles the lives and legacies of America's first ladies and the significant political and social contributions they've made . . . The First Ladies' Library, like thousands of libraries across America, stands as a beacon for education and information. If we have a question about the world, the library is the place to find the answer. And someone will always be here to help us find the answer — our dedicated librarians. Thanks to the librarians and docents here today for helping to educate and inform the public — and for inspiring people to learn their history.

It is vitally important for every American — and particularly for young people — to learn about our democracy. An understanding and appreciation of history makes every American a more engaged citizen. John Adams said, 'Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people,' and what knowledge we can gain from the stories of these great women.

The stories of First Ladies are a vivid reflection of American women and of American history. Their stories deserve to be told and remembered. As Edith Roosevelt honored first ladies before her by displaying their portraits in the White House, the National First Ladies' Library honors the lives of these great women. John

Homes of the First Ladies

*Adams' wife, Abigail, once reminded her husband to 'remember the ladies.' Thanks to the First Ladies' Library, the history of America's First Ladies will continue to be told — one remarkable woman at a time.*⁹

The nation owes a debt of gratitude to Mary Regula for her vision and dedication and to the hundreds of volunteers and professionals who have made the National First Ladies' Library possible. According to Edith Mayo, a member of the Board of Directors, "What you get is women using everyday life and everyday materials to structure a really important role created out of a vacuum. It's quite a stunning achievement."¹⁰



The focus of this study is, in general, the identification of homes of the First Ladies that are accessible to, and managed for, public visitation. By examining the backgrounds of the First Ladies and by being able to visit and experience the places where these women lived, we may expand our knowledge and sense of these women and the places that helped shape them and now interpret them. Regretfully, many homes once occupied by these women have been lost and it is only recently that preservationists and historians have become active in locating, restoring, and interpreting these structures. Girlhood or other pre-marital homes of Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, Mary Todd Lincoln, Julia Grant, Lucy Hayes, Ida McKinley, Edith Wilson, Grace Coolidge, Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower have survived and are open for public visitation. Many other homes that the First Ladies shared with their husbands, along with presidential libraries and museums, are repositories of important historical information and provide valuable insight into the backgrounds, lives, careers and influences not only of the men but, increasingly, also of their wives.

The first formal effort to recognize and protect a residence because of its historical significance as the former home of a First Lady, rather than a residence or other site primarily associated with her president-husband, was undertaken by the Abigail Adams Historical Society. Formed in 1947, the society's singular purpose was to save and restore the birthplace home of First Lady Abigail Adams. With the cooperation of the town of Weymouth, Massachusetts, plus countless volunteers and restoration experts, the society initiated a multi-year restoration project that was not completed until 1958! It was well worth the wait, as its authenticity is faithful to the history of the house and the era of its early occupants (see page 27). Then, in 1968 the

Kentucky Mansion Preservation Foundation was formed to preserve, restore and maintain Kentucky's historic properties that included the once-dilapidated childhood home of Mary Todd Lincoln in Lexington (see page 97). At the same time, dedicated citizens in Chillicothe, Ohio, formed a foundation to preserve the childhood home of First Lady Lucy Hayes which opened to the public in 1996 as the Lucy Hayes Heritage Center (see page 125).

And, in 1970, a restoration committee in the small town of Boone, Iowa, was formed to save the birthplace home of its favorite daughter, Mamie Eisenhower, a house which opened to the public in 1980 and was to become Boone's favorite tourist attraction (see page 208). The most recent manifestation of the effort to preserve homes of the First Ladies is that of the Edith Bolling Wilson Foundation of Wytheville, Virginia, which has purchased and is restoring and interpreting the birthplace of one of the nation's most interesting, influential and controversial First Ladies (see page 167). Another effort, more modest but nonetheless important, is that of Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, which acquired First Lady Grace Coolidge's girlhood home. This house is now in use as an administrative office, but it remains open to the public and features a special display area honoring Mrs. Coolidge (see page 179).

Appropriately, one truly extraordinary First Lady has been honored with her own National Historic Site — and the cottage called Val-Kill (see page 198) is the centerpiece of the Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site in Hyde Park, New York. In May, 1977, President Jimmy Carter signed a bill creating the site in recognition of the historic contributions of the woman known as "First Lady of the World."

Despite these important efforts, surely other opportunities exist for the identification, preservation and interpretation of homes or other features associated with a First Lady. Citizens in Guilford County, North Carolina, for example, saved some logs from the rude birth cabin of First Lady Dolley Madison when it was torn down in the nineteenth century, qualifying that undertaking as perhaps the earliest effort to preserve at least a part of such a "First Lady-related place" for its historical value (see page 39).

In the following pages, readers will find a short biography of each First Lady — including one of Harriet Lane and those four women who died before their husbands became president — followed by a description of her now publicly accessible home(s) (Figure 1, Table 1). In some cases, associated

Homes of the First Ladies

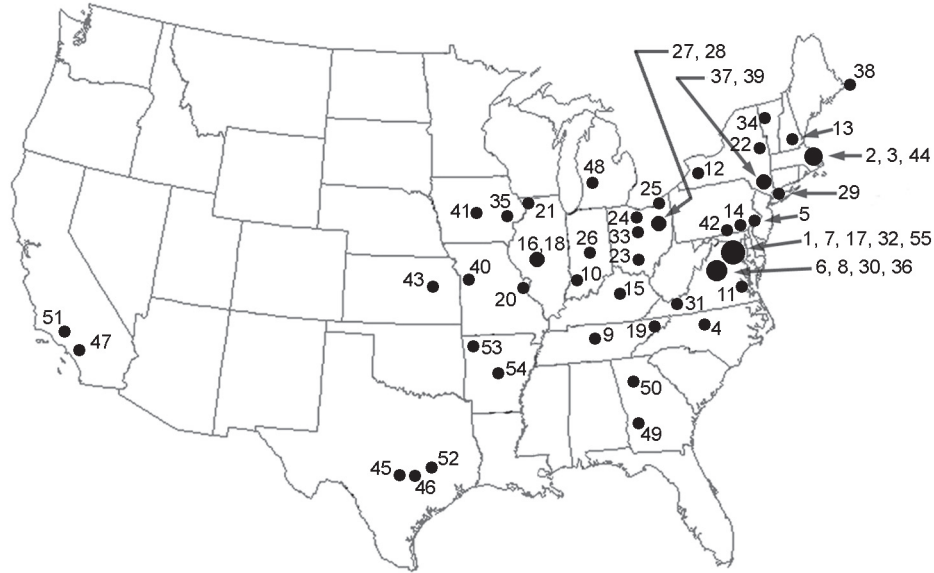


Table 1. Homes, museums, and related sites described in this book that commemorate the First Ladies.

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| 1. Mount Vernon | 17. President Lincoln's Cottage at the Soldiers' Home |
| 2. Abigail Adams Birthplace | 18. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum |
| 3. Adams National Historical Park | 19. Andrew Johnson National Historic Site |
| 4. Greensboro Historical Museum | 20. Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site <i>and</i> Grant's Farm |
| 5. Todd House | 21. Ulysses S. Grant Home State Historic Site |
| 6. Montpelier | 22. Grant Cottage State Historic Site |
| 7. James Monroe Museum and Memorial Library | 23. Lucy Hayes Heritage Center |
| 8. Ash Lawn-Highland | 24. Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center |
| 9. The Hermitage | 25. James A. Garfield National Historic Site |
| 10. Grouseland | 26. President Benjamin Harrison Home |
| 11. Sherwood Forest | 27. First Ladies National Historic Site |
| 12. Fillmore House Museum | |
| 13. The Pierce Manse | |
| 14. Wheatland | |
| 15. Mary Todd Lincoln House | |
| 16. Lincoln Home National Historic Site | |

Table 1, continued

28. William McKinley Presidential Library & Museum	43. Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum
29. Sagamore Hill National Historic Site	44. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum
30. Pine Knot	45. Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park and Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and Historic Site
31. Edith Bolling Wilson Birthplace Museum	46. Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum
32. Woodrow Wilson House Museum	47. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
33. The Harding Home	48. Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum
34. Goodhue Home	49. Jimmy Carter National Historic Site
35. Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum	50. Jimmy Carter Library and Museum
36. Rapidan Camp	51. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum
37. Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site <i>and</i> Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum	52. George Bush Presidential Library and Museum
38. Roosevelt Campobello International Park	53. Clinton House Museum
39. Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site	54. William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum
40. Harry S Truman National Historic Site	55. The White House
41. Mamie Doud Eisenhower Birthplace	
42. Eisenhower National Historic Site	

facilities — such as museums or presidential libraries that are open for public visitation — that contain interpretation, reference material and gallery displays related to First Ladies also have been included. Several of these sites are featured in the sixteen color plates that depict rooms and gardens in which the women lived and worked, and museum galleries that interpret and celebrate their lives. Collectively, the homes and other sites identified and described below allow the reader and visitor to better understand the places that helped shape the character and legacy of this group of important American women. Maps identify the general location of each of these sites.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of visitor information presented in the book — such as the location of the sites on maps, directions for reaching the sites, visiting hours, phone numbers, admission fees and facilities for the disabled — much of this information is subject to change. When planning a visit to any of these sites, it is suggested that visitors call, write or log on to the appropriate web site to obtain the most current information and consult detailed maps or current directions for actually reaching the sites.



I would have a “position” but not a real “job” . . . There is no training manual for First Ladies . . . Each carved out a role that reflected her own interests and style and that balanced the needs of her husband, family and country. So would I . . . I had to decide what I wanted to do with the opportunities and responsibilities I had inherited. Over the years, the role of the First Lady has been perceived as largely symbolic. She is expected to represent an ideal — and largely mythical — concept of American womanhood.

—Hillary Rodham Clinton¹¹