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# Chapter 1
# The Changing Role of First Ladies in the United States

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The story of the First Ladies of the United States is one of drama, personal struggle, and both great successes and failures. It's a story of ambition, joy, disappointment, and most often a total loss of privacy. In the early years of the republic, becoming First Lady imposed considerable dangers, both social and economic, on First Ladies and their families. The White House was open to just about everyone, and it had no security yet.

Today, First Ladies have professional roles and often aid in policy development. They work together with Congress and have become active policy makers. However, every First Lady decides how active they'll be. Hillary Clinton was one of the most active First Ladies in recent history, while Melania Trump was less active and played the role of a more traditional First Lady (see Chapter 20 for more). A First Lady's temperament, family situation, character, and even relationship with the president determines all of that. First Ladies with big political ambitions can use their office as a stepping stone to future offices. Eleanor Roosevelt did so with working for the United Nations after leaving her role as First Lady in 1945 (see Chapter 14), and Hillary Clinton ran and won a U.S. Senate seat after serving two terms as First Lady (see Chapter 18).

The role of First Lady has seen significant changes over the years. Women have made progress in society and are found at the highest levels of government, including now the vice presidency. Women today serve in Congress, even becoming the Speaker of the House of Representatives; they are members of the Supreme Court; and they govern states. It's only a question of time before a woman will become president and the U.S. will have its first "First Gentleman."

# First Ladies in U.S. History

Why become a First Lady? Most of the time, First Ladies had no choice. They were married to someone who just became president. In some instances, they had actually pushed their husbands into politics. Great examples include Sarah Polk and Helen Taft (see Chapters 7 and 12). They loved the game of politics and enjoyed the prestige of being First Lady. In fact, Julia Grant was so upset that her husband refused to run for a third term that she was in tears when she had to leave the White House (Chapter 10). More recently, First Ladies wanted to impact social and economic reforms and change the country and its people. Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosalynn Carter, Barbara Bush, and Hillary Clinton are examples of socially conscious First Ladies who wanted to bring about change (see Chapters 14, 17, and 18 for more on their stories).

## Defining a First Lady

Most of the 47 First Ladies in this book are famous because of the men they married. However, most First Ladies also impacted their husband's lives and directly and indirectly made significant contributions to U.S. history. From Martha Washington (Chapter 3) traveling with the Continental Army and improving soldiers' morale to Mary Todd Lincoln (Chapter 9) encouraging her husband to run for political office, in turn saving the Union, to Helen Taft (Chapter 12) pushing her husband to become president, American history wouldn't have been the same without the country's First Ladies.

Until recently, it was believed that First Ladies mattered and held their jobs only because their husbands had become president. That is true by definition but doesn't explain the whole story. Many claim that First Ladies owe their space in history to the men they married and that they didn't contribute much to the history and evolution of the United States. For them, First Ladies were basically footnotes in history. This is clearly wrong.

## FINANCIAL RAMIFICATIONS OF BEING FIRST LADY

Early on, the positions of President and First Lady imposed financial hardships. Presidents and First Ladies had to use their own resources to furnish the White House and to host dinners and parties. The amount of money Congress appropriated for these functions wasn't enough, and to top it off, the job of president wasn't compensated well, and the First Lady received no compensation at all. And, of course, after retirement, neither the president nor First Lady received a pension. This would not change until pensions for ex-presidents were approved in the 1950s, and presidents started receiving a comfortable salary beginning in 1969, when President Nixon received salary of $200,000.

Therefore, the job of First Lady involved personal sacrifices, and often a price, usually economic or even health-wise, had to be paid. Unlike today, when presidents and their wives make millions after they retire, usually by writing their memoirs and/or giving speeches, back then, being president could bankrupt a family. Early presidents and First Ladies left the White House often poorer than when they entered it. Dolley Madison, for example, was broke at the end of her life, and people left money in her house whenever she invited them over.

Not surprisingly, many First Ladies were quite upset when they found out their husbands had won the presidential elections and didn't celebrate but withdrew from the functions expected of a First Lady. Instead, they had their daughters or nieces take their place. Other First Ladies, like Sarah Polk, became penny pinchers and tried to run the White House the cheapest way possible.

Studies show that many First Ladies mattered more than people thought. They helped out with finances, managing family farms, teaching school, or working after getting married so that their husband could enter politics. In addition, most First Ladies came from social and economic backgrounds superior to the men they married. Without their contributions, their husbands couldn't have become presidents. Many First Ladies were even familiar with politics and had early exposure to politics through a father, a grandfather, or an uncle. Helen Taft, for example, decided to pursue a career in politics through her husband. Her father and grandfather had served in Congress, and she enjoyed the campaign for political office. This allowed her to give advice and help advance her husband's political career. Without her, there would have been no President Taft. (See Chapter 12 for her full story.)

It took quite some time to discover how important First Ladies actually were in the history of the U.S. The reason is that most early First Ladies, such as Martha Washington, didn't leave a lot of information for historians to study. Many burned

all their correspondence with their husbands and friends that contained much information. The few who didn't, like Abigail Adams, left historians with a plethora of information and provided a picture of the time they lived in and information on their job as First Lady and how they contributed to their husband's career and successes.

This started to change, however, after the Civil War. First Ladies started leaving more information to be studied. In fact, Julia Grant, Helen Taft, and Edith Wilson all wrote their memoirs, giving us a lot of information on the role of First Lady and the gradual changes the office undertook.

Most First Ladies accomplished great things, often before becoming First Lady. Here are some examples:

- Elizabeth Monroe single-handedly saved the wife of the American war hero the Marquis de Lafayette in Paris during the French Revolution. See Chapter 5.
- Louisa Adams traveled by herself with a young child during the wintertime from Russia to France during the Napoleonic wars. See Chapter 5.
- Lou Hoover, who was in China during the Boxer Rebellion, carried a gun and got involved in shoot-outs. See Chapter 13.

## Powers of the First Lady

The position of First Lady isn't mentioned in the Constitution. However, the position soon became attached to the presidency and received some informal powers.

REMEMBER

The position of First Lady has been defined by culture and not the Constitution. There's no job description and no laws regulating First Lady behavior. However, changing American culture has put both limitations and opportunities on the role of First Lady. Cleary, back in the 19th century, an active First Lady campaigning for her husband and trying to impact policy making publicly wouldn't have been tolerated. Today, the American public expects First Ladies to be educated, to campaign for their husbands, and to even run for office themselves.

For this reason, the position of First Lady has considerable power today, and the First Lady has become one of the most powerful persons in Washington, D.C. From Betty Ford (see Chapter 16) who encouraged her husband to pardon President Nixon to Hillary Clinton who was put in charge of reforming healthcare in the United States, First Ladies have shown that they matter and can impact policy making.

## Assuming head of state roles

The Constitution provides a president with two jobs. First, there's the head of state position; and second, there's the head of government position. The first is ceremonial and doesn't matter that much; therefore, presidents have given ceremonial powers to First Ladies. Martha Washington attended church on her husband's behalf (see Chapter 3); Nancy Reagan was the president's stand-in after the assassination attempt on her husband (see Chapter 17); and Lady Bird Johnson represented for her husband campaigning in the South (see Chapter 16).

## Having unseen powers

In the first years of the republic, First Ladies were mostly concerned with their hostess role and arranging social events. They further oversaw renovations of the White House. While many dismiss these functions as irrelevant, they had very political undertones. Every teatime, soiree, and formal dinner can be used politically, as Louisa Adams showed in 1825, when during a soiree the night before Congress picked her husband as the new president, she convinced several Congressmen to vote for her husband.

Dolley Madison organized weekly Wednesday evening get-togethers where she invited Congressmen from both parties and often took the place of her husband, who can't take sides on issues, discussing politics with her guests. Soon she became one of the most powerful political brokers in the capital.

## Getting into the limelight

Some First Ladies have made an imprint quietly, while others have gone public. Abigail Adams was able to discuss politics and convince her husband on issues in more than a thousand letters written to her husband. Others have used media, such as the radio or television, to make or even change policy. Both Betty Ford and Rosalynn Carter went public on issues such as the equal rights amendment, abortion, and mental health.

With the New Deal and WWII, more government power became centralized in the office of the president in the 1930s and 1940s. Not surprisingly, the media began to focus more on Washington, D.C., and the office of the president. Increased focus on the president also led to more attention being paid to the First Lady. The advance of television further increased this coverage. Suddenly, people could see the First Ladies in action and listen to them speak. By 1960, half of all Americans owned a television set, and this increased coverage of the First Ladies immensely.

### Becoming institutionalized

With Edith Roosevelt, at the turn of the 20th century, the office of the First Lady became more institutionalized (see Chapter 12). She hired highly paid and educated professional staffers, and suddenly staff weren't just helpers in the kitchen but full-time professional advisors. These advisors attended morning briefings with the First Lady and on occasion worked closely with the president's staff. Lady Bird Johnson then took it a step further and turned the East Wing of the White House into a business organization and ran it as such (check out Chapter 16). Rosalynn Carter completed the process of institutionalization by moving her office to the East Wing and creating a formal Office of the First Lady.

# The Evolution of the Position of First Lady

The office of First Lady, and likewise the women who fill that role, has gone through an evolution since its conception to present day. I discuss those changes in four phases in this section.

## Phase I (1789–1829)

Part 2 of the book covers the First Ladies of this phase. Martha Washington set the foundation for First Lady obligations. On occasion, she played the part of head of state, and she set the precedent of being a great hostess who wasn't involved in policy making.

Martha Washington's role as First Lady was undefined. She herself didn't know what to expect of the position. She was surprised when she received a 13-gun salute and shouts of "Long live Lady Washington!" when she arrived in the then-capital New York City. She decided to become the perfect hostess, because the democratic spirit of the time called for the president to open the doors of the executive mansion in New York City anytime. Soon this led to problems. Too many people took advantage of the open doors and just showed up. No work could get done, and no privacy existed. So it was decided to limit open houses and receptions.

Another hostess function was to deal with callers, usually the wives of Senators, House members, and foreign diplomats, who came to the door of the White House and left their cards. It was customary that a First Lady returned their visits. Often, First Ladies would have to make up to 60 visits a week. To make matters worse, the White House was open to everybody who wanted to show up on New Year's Day, with the exception of wartime or periods of mourning. Thousands would stop annually, and the practice wasn't stopped until the Hoover administration in 1933.

While Abigail Adams was an opinionated woman who influenced her husband in private, publicly she mostly fulfilled her hostess function. Dolley Madison was the first to help a widower, Thomas Jefferson, and then served eight years as First Lady. She dominated the White House for a long time. She was such a superior hostess that future First Ladies would ask her advice on becoming a hostess as late as 1845, but she also managed to mix the social part of being a hostess with the political part. Not only did she start the tradition of having an inaugural ball, but she also was truly nonpartisan at her receptions and everybody loved her for it. In addition, she called upon every wife of a Congressman and invited them to the White House, creating goodwill among the spouses of all Congressmen at the time.

The country's early First Ladies were sweet, quiet, and gracious hostesses in public and played a supportive role to their husband, which reflected the times they lived in. In private, they displayed courage, had exceptional training, spoke foreign languages, read French philosophers, and traveled abroad creating goodwill for the U.S. in Europe.

## Phase II (1829–1869)

Phase II is dominated by young substitutes — either daughters, daughters-in-law, or nieces — for First Ladies. There were few mature or strong First Ladies during this period; most were youthful surrogates who didn't impact policy making much. (Turn to Part 3 for a closer look at these ladies.)

Six out of nine first ladies during this time period pleaded ill health or grief as reasons for not being able to perform First Lady functions. They were Anna Harrison, Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor, Abigail Fillmore, Jane Pierce, and Eliza Johnson. Rachel Jackson had made arrangements for her niece to serve as First Lady in case she died, which she did. In some cases, there was no other way. Andrew Jackson's wife passed right after he got elected president in 1828 and was unable to serve as First Lady. The same situation occurred in Martin Van Buren's case. In both instances, younger nieces had to take over as First Lady.

Only two First Ladies were exceptions. Both Sarah Polk and Harriet Lane, the niece of President Buchanan who was a bachelor, were excited to become First Lady and were quite active. Not surprisingly, both are among my top ten most influential First Ladies (see Chapter 21).

## Phase III (1869–1933)

The role of First Lady changed again after 1869. Suddenly, there were no more youthful surrogates being used as First Ladies. The new First Ladies came from different backgrounds compared to the First Ladies in Phase I. The ladies discussed in Part 4

weren't married to founding fathers nor were they the wives of rich plantation owners. However, they were well educated, and many came from small-town America.

The press started talking about the First Ladies reflecting the ideal of the new woman. The new woman was educated, as universities had opened up enrollment to women. The new woman was also involved in political organizations. The Civil War had gotten many women involved in public organizations, and all female political and social clubs were founded.

Many political and social barriers were broken down during this period. Some political gains happened, too. Women got the right to vote at the local and state level, and the country saw its first female politicians elected at the local level. Some women were even appointed to state and local government positions. By 1900, women could vote in four states: Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, and Utah. Even though women still had to attach themselves to their husband's career, many spoke out in public and created and joined national organizations. Not surprisingly, the suffrage movement gained steam, too, and by 1917, the first female member of Congress, Jeannette Rankin from Montana, was elected.

With the outbreak of WWI, the role of women and First Ladies changed yet again. After becoming a part of the war effort, women suddenly stayed a part of the workforce and in 1920 received the right to vote at the presidential level. Florence Harding was the first woman to cast a ballot for her husband in 1920. Right before, Edith Wilson basically became the president herself after Woodrow Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke. She became his guardian and gatekeeper and studied every paper and decided what would go to the president and what wouldn't. In other words, she became responsible for policy making, and letters sent to her addressed her as "Mrs. President."

## Phase IV (1933–Present)

In the 20th century, with wars and the second industrial revolution, the role of women dramatically changed in the U.S. This brought about a change in the role First Ladies performed and also changes in American culture. Here is where the modern era for First Ladies began. They became public figures pursuing their own causes, which made them not only more famous but also resulted in the media scrutinizing them even more. (Check out Part 5 for these First Ladies.)

Then, after 1960, First Ladies' roles changed rapidly one more time. For the first time, First Ladies started campaigning for their husbands, even on their own, which previously had been considered not proper. Today, First Ladies campaigning

for their husbands hasn't just been accepted but is expected. In addition, First Ladies today are expected to pick a public cause to focus on, which in turn gets them involved in political issues. They truly have become a first partner to today's presidents. By now, First Ladies often outstrip their husbands in popularity, emotional access by the public, and even book sales.

In the beginning, First Ladies were mostly nonpartners in their husband's presidencies, and today they have become full partners. They are now equal in not just social or charitable matters but also in political matters. From Edith Wilson to Eleanor Roosevelt to Hilary Clinton, First Ladies have become trusted allies and advisors for their husbands and have asserted themselves independently.

Today, many First Ladies are highly educated, have professional portfolios, and have ambition to seek political office. Traditionally, a First Lady's background has impacted how influential and assertive she will be.

Educational achievement and professional experience are great predictors on how strong First Ladies will be. Based on this, it's possible to predict that future First Ladies will be more independent, more politically involved, and possibly more controversial in the public's eyes compared to the First Ladies of the past.