



Abigail Adams' yellow leather shoes



Embroidered box presented to Edith Wilson



Grace Coolidge's evening dress



Martha Washington's tea tray

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All object photographs courtesy National Museum of American History.

Timeline images courtesy Library of Congress, the White House, and White House Historical Association (White House Collection).

Cover images: China from the Polk (left) and Eisenhower administrations; Frances Cleveland's evening gown.

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# First Ladies

Political Role & Public Image



Based on the Smithsonian's popular permanent exhibition of the same name, *First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image* examines the demanding duties of the presidential partner and national hostess. This traveling exhibition explores how the first lady's role has evolved from ceremonial partner to one of international celebrity and recognized political power, and illustrates the importance of the first lady's public image to the success of a presidential administration.

The exhibition opens with Martha Washington's and Abigail Adams' contributions to creating the position of first lady for the new nation. Other sections explore the various roles played by subsequent first ladies as the position evolved, the challenges they faced in defining and maintaining their images in the public spotlight, and the activities that first ladies have pursued after leaving the White House.



Mary Lincoln's silver tea and coffee service

# First Ladies

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Since the beginning of the 20th century, every first lady has been married to the president. But the first lady has not always been the president's wife. The title also refers to other women who have served as official White House hostess. Historically, if a president was unmarried or widowed or if his wife was otherwise unable to serve as hostess, he chose another family member or friend to act as first lady.

## Political Role

The first lady occupies a unique position in American politics. Although unelected and unpaid, she is an influential figure in many spheres: as the president's social partner and the nation's hostess, as an advocate for social causes, as the president's political partner, and as an important part of a political campaign.

Many first ladies have approached their new position with deep ambivalence. They are expected to be public, political wives in a society that, throughout much of American history, insisted that women remain within the sphere of home and family. Some first ladies see their official duties as an extension of the supportive social role they play in their marriages. Some join their husbands in the political struggles of the day. Others champion social and political causes.



## Public Image

First ladies have always sought to project a favorable public image. Their efforts have won them praise, criticism, or both. Over time, the first lady's public image has changed in response to the interplay of several factors, including the public's demand for information, the growth of media technology, and each first lady's response to her position and the changing role of women.

The increased demand for access and information has forced some first ladies to become more adept and active in shaping their public images. As many have found, the ability to control their public image can be crucial to the success of a president's administration.

Gilt epergne from the Adams family

## For Further Reading

For more information, see the traveling exhibition's companion book, *First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image* by Edith P. Mayo and Lisa Kathleen Graddy (Scala Publishers Ltd., 2004), and the following books.

*American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy* by Lewis L. Gould (ed.) (Taylor and Francis Books, 2001).

*First Ladies from Martha Washington to Laura Bush* by Betty Boyd Caroli (Oxford University Press, 2003).

*First Ladies: Political Role and Public Image* by Edith P. Mayo with Denise D. Meringolo (National Museum of American History, 1994).

*First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power 1789-1961* by Carl Sferrazza Anthony (William Morrow & Co., 1990).

*First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power 1961-1990* by Carl Sferrazza Anthony (William Morrow & Co., 1991).

*The Smithsonian Book of the First Ladies: Their Times, Lives, and Issues* by Edith P. Mayo (H. Holt, 1996).

### 1789



Martha Washington  
(1731-1802)  
First Lady 1789-1797

George Washington  
President 1789-1797



Abigail Adams  
(1744-1818)  
First Lady 1797-1801

John Adams  
President 1797-1801



Martha Jefferson Randolph,  
daughter  
(1772-1836)  
First Lady 1801-1809

Dolley Madison,  
wife of Secretary of State  
(1768-1849)  
First Lady 1801-1809



Dolley Madison  
(1768-1849)  
First Lady 1809-1817

James Madison  
President 1809-1817



Elizabeth Monroe  
(1768-1830)  
First Lady 1817-1825

James Monroe  
President 1817-1825



Louisa Catherine Adams  
(1775-1852)  
First Lady 1825-1829

John Quincy Adams  
President 1825-1829



Emily Donelson,  
niece  
(1807-1836)  
First Lady 1829-1831

Andrew Jackson  
President 1829-1837



Sarah Yorke Jackson,  
daughter-in-law  
(1805-1887)  
First Lady 1831-1837

Andrew Jackson  
President 1829-1837



Angelica Van Buren,  
daughter-in-law  
(1816-1877)  
First Lady 1838-1841

Martin Van Buren  
President 1837-1841



Anna Harrison  
(1775-1864)  
First Lady 1841

William Henry Harrison  
President 1841



Letitia Tyler  
(1790-1842)  
First Lady 1841-1842

John Tyler  
President 1841-1845



Julia Tyler  
(1820-1889)  
First Lady 1844-1845

James Polk  
President 1845-1849



Sarah Polk  
(1803-1891)  
First Lady 1845-1849

Zachary Taylor  
President 1849-1850



Betty Taylor Bliss,  
daughter  
(1824-1909)  
First Lady 1849-1850

Millard Fillmore  
President 1850-1853



Abigail Fillmore  
(1798-1853)  
First Lady 1850-1853

Franklin Pierce  
President 1853-1857



Jane Pierce  
(1806-1863)  
First Lady 1853-1857

James Buchanan  
President 1857-1861



Harriet Lane,  
niece  
(1830-1903)  
First Lady 1857-1861

Abraham Lincoln  
President 1861-1865



Mary Lincoln  
(1816-1882)  
First Lady 1861-1865

Andrew Johnson  
President 1865-1869



Eliza Johnson  
(1810-1876)  
First Lady 1865-1869

Ulysses S. Grant  
President 1869-1877



Julia Grant  
(1826-1902)  
First Lady 1869-1877

Rutherford B. Hayes  
President 1877-1881



Lucy Hayes  
(1831-1889)  
First Lady 1877-1881

James Garfield  
President 1881



Lucretia Garfield  
(1832-1918)  
First Lady 1881

Chester A. Arthur  
President 1881-1885



Mary Arthur McElroy,  
sister  
(1841-1917)  
First Lady 1881-1885

Chester A. Arthur  
President 1881-1885

### 1831

### 1853

### 1886



Frances Cleveland  
(1864-1947)  
First Lady 1886-1889 and  
1893-1897

Grover Cleveland  
President 1885-1889 and  
1893-1897



Caroline Harrison  
(1832-1892)  
First Lady 1889-1892

Benjamin Harrison  
President 1889-1893



Ida McKinley  
(1847-1907)  
First Lady 1897-1901

William McKinley  
President 1897-1901



Edith Roosevelt  
(1861-1948)  
First Lady 1901-1909

Theodore Roosevelt  
President 1901-1909



Helen Taft  
(1861-1943)  
First Lady 1909-1913

William Taft  
President 1909-1913



Ellen Wilson  
(1860-1924)  
First Lady 1913-1914

Woodrow Wilson  
President 1913-1921



Edith Wilson  
(1872-1961)  
First Lady 1915-1921

Warren G. Harding  
President 1921-1923



Florence Harding  
(1860-1924)  
First Lady 1921-1923

Calvin Coolidge  
President 1923-1929



Grace Coolidge  
(1879-1957)  
First Lady 1923-1929

Herbert Hoover  
President 1929-1933



Lou Hoover  
(1874-1944)  
First Lady 1929-1933

Franklin D. Roosevelt  
President 1933-1945



Eleanor Roosevelt  
(1884-1962)  
First Lady 1933-1945

Harry S. Truman  
President 1945-1953



Bess Truman  
(1885-1982)  
First Lady 1945-1953

Dwight D. Eisenhower  
President 1953-1961



Mamie Eisenhower  
(1896-1979)  
First Lady 1953-1961

John F. Kennedy  
President 1961-1963



Jacqueline Kennedy  
(1929-1994)  
First Lady 1961-1963

Lyndon B. Johnson  
President 1963-1969



Lady Bird Johnson  
(b. 1912)  
First Lady 1963-1969

Richard M. Nixon  
President 1969-1974



Pat Nixon  
(1912-1993)  
First Lady 1969-1974

Gerald R. Ford  
President 1974-1977



Betty Ford  
(b. 1918)  
First Lady 1974-1977

Jimmy Carter  
President 1977-1981



Rosalynn Carter  
(b. 1927)  
First Lady 1977-1981

Ronald Reagan  
President 1981-1989



Nancy Reagan  
(b. 1921)  
First Lady 1981-1989

George W. Bush  
President 1989-1993



Barbara Bush  
(b. 1925)  
First Lady 1989-1993

William J. Clinton  
President 1993-2001



Hillary Clinton  
(b. 1947)  
First Lady 1993-2001

George W. Bush  
President 2001-



Laura Bush  
(b. 1946)  
First Lady 2001-

George W. Bush  
President 2001-

### 2001