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Introduction

American First Ladies are among the most popular and well-known figures in the world. Indeed, the First Lady is easily recognizable to many grade school students, and the American public can more readily identify their First Lady than they can the most senior members of Congress or even the vice president. Add to that the fact that the First Lady often tops the Gallup Organization's annual poll to determine the United States' most admired women. What emerges is a clear picture of one of the most prominent American public figures. Yet, this familiarity and popularity tell only part of the story, and it would appear that we know less about the presidential spouses than would initially seem to be the case.

In truth, little is known about many early First Ladies, especially those serving prior to the twentieth century. Moreover, the public remains uncertain about what roles and duties it expects First Ladies to perform. The serious study of the institution began only at the close of the twentieth century. The First Ladyship is a vastly more complex and powerful office than it is often depicted as being in textbooks and the media. For instance, even though the First Lady emerged over the course of the twentieth century as one of the most powerful positions in the United States, it must be remembered that this person is unelected, unappointed, and unpaid for service. In short, First Ladyship is an intriguing institution, one that has been home to a group of no less intriguing individuals.

Further consideration of the First Ladies of the sort encompassed in this encyclopedia is necessary if one is to gain an adequate under-

standing of the office and its occupants. Also, the reader should rest assured that he or she will gain a full appreciation for the trials and tribulations of the presidential spouses, which have earned them their rightful place in American history.

Perhaps the First Lady is worth our attention if for no other reason than she has been a part of the presidency since the United States' founding. To be sure, the existence of the First Ladyship even predates the completion of the White House. During the inaugural presidency of George Washington, the White House was under construction, and the Washingtons were forced to serve from a private residence in New York City, then later from a home in Philadelphia. Although the title of First Lady was not used until much later in the next century, Martha Washington did serve her country in the capacity of presidential spouse. In this role, Lady Washington presided over official state affairs and appeared with her husband at public events. George Washington's two terms as president ended in 1797, with the presidential residence in the city bearing his name still unfinished.

Abigail Adams, wife of the second president, was the first spouse to actually reside in the White House. She and her husband, President John Adams, moved into the newly completed building in 1800, only four months before the end of his term in office. Although Abigail and John Adams did live in the White House, they were like many other early presidential couples who did not enjoy the mansion as the grand structure it is today. Only six rooms in the building were completed in 1800,

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and Mrs. Adams complained that the original design of the Executive Mansion failed to consider such concerns as practicality and livability. Abigail was even forced to hang her laundry in the East Room and had a difficult time keeping the building warm and dry in the cold Washington winter. Many other pre-twentieth century presidential couples found the Executive Mansion to be inadequately staffed, and the first couple also had to pay for entertainment, staff support, and building upkeep out of their own pockets.

The presidential wives' service also predates the use of the term First Lady. The title was not originally a part of the office. In fact, the first few presidential spouses were known by a variety of titles. Martha Washington, for instance, was widely known as Lady Washington, and Dolley Madison was occasionally called Lady Presidentess. Later, in the late 1850's, Harriet Lane, the niece of bachelor President James Buchanan, was nicknamed the Democratic Queen. Some newspapers of the day also referred to her as Lady of the White House.

The exact date of origin of the title remains unclear, but a reference to Dolley Madison, the woman who helped make the office popular, might mark the initial use of the title. While delivering the eulogy after Dolley Madison's death in 1849, President Zachary Taylor spoke of her as "our First Lady for a half-century." The term did not immediately catch on and would not appear again until the Civil War, when the wife of Jefferson Davis was described by journalists as the "First Lady of the Confederacy." A decade and a half later, in the late 1870's, newspapers spoke of Lucy Hayes as "the First Lady of the Land," in reference to a nationwide tour she completed with her husband. However, it was not until the twentieth century that the title really became commonplace.

Even though the title First Lady is widely accepted today and has even been used to de-

scribe spouses of male political leaders around the world, governor's wives, and women of prominence in theater, the arts, and even commerce, some First Ladies did not like the moniker. Jackie Kennedy so disliked the title that she forbade her staff from using it. Rosalynn Carter opted simply for "Mrs. Carter" when in the company of the White House staff.

Who Can Be Considered a First Lady?

To date, only two bachelors have been elected to the presidency. James Buchanan and Grover Cleveland hold this distinction; however, Cleveland married Frances Folsom during his presidency. In total, First Ladies have served in thirty-nine of the first forty-four presidencies, so the institution of the First Ladyship has certainly been a part of the American presidency for most of the nation's history. Moreover, five spouses died prior to their husband's service as president: Martha Jefferson, Rachel Jackson, Hannah Van Buren, Ellen Arthur, and Alice Roosevelt. Even though these women did not preside over the White House, they are still deserving of our consideration because they were influential forces in the lives and careers of their husbands in the period before his election to the presidency. For instance, Rachel and Andrew Jackson had been married for thirty-seven years before her untimely passing during the brief interim between Andrew Jackson's election and inauguration as president. Likewise, Ellen Arthur passed away just prior to her husband's selection as vice president; Ellen and Chester Arthur had been husband and wife for twenty years at the time of her death. After Alice Lee Roosevelt's death, Theodore Roosevelt remarried, and his second wife, Edith, was with him during his presidency.

Three First Ladies died while serving in the White House: Letitia Tyler, Caroline Harrison, and Ellen Wilson. All three of these presidential wives appear to have had close relationships with their husbands throughout their married lives, including the period that they

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were in the White House. All three widowed presidents would later remarry. In fact, presidents John Tyler and Woodrow Wilson remarried while still serving as president, so they each had two different First Ladies during their White House years.

The majority of First Ladies outlived their husbands. Only two presidential widows, Frances Cleveland and Jackie Kennedy, would later remarry. These two were considerably younger than their first husbands. A total of three presidential spouses had previously been married and widowed before marrying their second husbands, men who would go on to be presidents. Included in this group are early mothers of the nation Martha Washington, Martha Jefferson, and Dolley Madison. Each of these three women brought children from their previous marriages into their second marriages. There have been five divorces associated with the presidency, three involving eventual First Ladies: Rachel Donelson (Jackson), Florence Kling (Harding), and Betty Bloomer (Ford). These women were divorced when they married their second husbands. President Ronald Reagan had been married to actress Jane Wyman before marrying Nancy Reagan. Wyman herself had previously been divorced before marrying Reagan.

At times, when the president's spouse was either deceased or too ill to carry out her duties, the president received the assistance of "surrogate" White House hostesses. This was true for presidents Thomas Jefferson, Martin Van Buren, and Andrew Jackson, all of whom lost wives prior to their inaugurations. Typically, young female relatives were called upon to preside over the social events of the White House. Oftentimes, these young nieces, daughters, and daughters-in-law lived at the White House. Some First Ladies, including Letitia Tyler, Jane Pierce, and Anna Harrison, were limited by poor health and also sought the services of a female relative to assist them in managing the White House's social affairs. Such examples

of surrogate hostesses being called into duty point to the importance of the institution within the White House as one responsible for social events.

The Second-Toughest Job in the United States?

Not only have First Ladies been a part of the presidency since the inaugural administration of George Washington, but presidential wives have also made many important contributions to their husbands' lives and presidencies. In so doing, they helped shape the very course of American history. Indeed, many presidents found the First Lady's presence, service, and counsel to be invaluable and a source of their own success in the White House.

Although the office is not a job per se, and the president's spouse is not mentioned in the Constitution, First Ladies have fulfilled many social and political functions in the White House. For example, the First Lady often presides over White House social events, oversees the upkeep of the Executive Mansion, makes obligatory public appearances, and supports her husband's political agenda.

Initially, and perhaps because of the sex roles present in society, many a First Lady has found herself responsible for running the White House. In addition to being a political landmark of the United States, the White House is the private residence of the first family. Although no distinct job description existed for First Ladies, the office evolved to be responsible for the social affairs of the White House to the extent that the First Lady has become the United States' de facto social hostess. She is expected to preside over everything from formal state dinners for visiting dignitaries to afternoon receptions for women's social clubs. In so doing, First Ladies manage a large White House domestic staff and such details as menu selection, seating arrangements, guest lists, and entertainment for a wide variety of state affairs that demand careful attention to detail

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and protocol.

Some First Ladies also functioned as the chief White House preservationist, archivist, or tour guide. Not surprisingly, the wear and tear on the building has required many First Ladies to supervise elaborate renovations and restorations of the furniture, rooms, and historical pieces found in the White House. Some First Ladies have consulted historians and architects in their efforts to achieve historically accurate restorations. Most First Ladies have been responsible for selecting the White House's official china sets and furnishings. Thanks to the efforts of First Ladies, the White House remains a living museum of American history, replete with historic period collections and political memorabilia from the nation's past.

First Ladies are now expected to campaign for their husbands, and many function as presidential booster, spokesperson, and surrogate, traveling with and appearing on behalf of the president. Several First Ladies have traveled internationally. Rosalynn Carter even met with heads of Latin American states in the official capacity of presidential envoy. Other First Ladies, from Martha Washington to Mary Lincoln to Barbara Bush, have met with U.S. troops during times of war and have visited soldiers in military hospitals.

The nature of American politics and society has required the wives of politicians to appear in public with their husbands and, at a minimum, give the appearance of supporting his campaign and political office. Nowhere in American politics has this been more prevalent than in election years, with the prospective president and First Lady spending upward of a year making constant campaign appearances together. Most recent First Ladies have also been asked to make public speeches while on the presidential stump. This campaigning does not stop after the election. Once in office, First Ladies often continue to lobby for their husbands' programs and make public appearances on behalf of the president's public image

and popularity. Indeed, many First Ladies have become quite adept at campaigning. Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama were popular speakers on the campaign stump. Lady Bird Johnson, Rosalynn Carter, and Michelle Obama campaigned alone and on behalf of their husbands. Barbara Bush and Bess Truman were fixtures next to their husbands on the campaign swing and were often met with more enthusiastic applause than that which greeted their husbands. Even in the nineteenth century, such First Ladies as Ida McKinley and Frances Cleveland appeared on their husbands' campaign paraphernalia.

First Ladies have gone above and beyond the call of duty by making speeches, fulfilling a demanding schedule of travel and public appearances, and even serving as the president's political adviser. This is especially true in more recent times, when First Ladies have functioned as political partners. It is not uncommon for recent First Ladies to assist the president in making staffing and political appointments, serving on presidential task forces, attending cabinet meetings, and speaking on his behalf at political rallies. At their husbands' urging, First Ladies Rosalynn Carter and Hillary Rodham Clinton led, respectively, high-profile mental health and health care reform task forces. Other First Ladies, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, were called upon to testify before Congress as expert witnesses on policy matters. Mrs. Roosevelt also prompted her husband to appoint a woman to his cabinet: President Franklin D. Roosevelt selected Frances Perkins as his secretary of labor, the first woman to serve as a cabinet secretary. As far back as the 1840's, Sarah Polk served as James K. Polk's personal secretary, editing his speeches, giving him political advice, and organizing his official papers.

The First Lady has also become a public leader in her own right. Beginning with Jackie Kennedy, First Ladies have emerged as advocates of important social issues and have become identified with a particular social cause

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or pet project. Pat Nixon advocated volunteerism, Lady Bird Johnson initiated a nationwide beautification and conservation program, Nancy Reagan became the leading spokeswoman for the “Just Say No” to drugs campaign, both Barbara and Laura Bush embraced adult literary and reading as their causes, and Michelle Obama emerged as a tireless champion of military families, fitness and nutrition, and improving the health of children. To be sure, the public has grown to expect First Ladies to champion social issues and perform a wide array of functions within and beyond the White House. At this challenge First Ladies have generally succeeded. They have led large, public campaigns on behalf of a wide array of important social issues and, in so doing, emerged as leading spokespersons for these issues and generated public interest in and support for these causes.

Ironically, First Ladies are subject to criticism for their political activism, even if this activism is in response to public expectations. The American public has yet to determine its preference regarding the parameters of involvement for First Ladies in political activities. Public opinion polls reflect this uncertainty, revealing that the public is divided as to the exact roles and responsibilities it deems appropriate for First Ladies. It seems that if First Ladies are too active they are criticized, and if they are too inactive they are criticized. For instance, First Ladies have been condemned simultaneously for being too active and too passive, too old-fashioned and frumpy yet too excessive and uppity, and for having either too many socials or not enough socials. Martha Washington was thought to be too old, whereas the public was concerned that Julia Tyler was too young. Betty Ford was criticized for being too outspoken, whereas others complained that Pat Nixon was too reserved and unwilling to speak her mind. Harriet Lane was too happy, and Jane Pierce was too depressed. Nancy Reagan was criticized for saying that her life began

when she met her husband, and Hillary Rodham Clinton was attacked for having a career independent of that of her husband. In fact, so prevalent is public criticism that it would appear that about the only thing all First Ladies have in common, besides being married to someone who is the president, is that they all have been criticized for their actions in the White House.

The most common basis for such public condemnation is that a First Lady is too powerful. This criticism dates all the way back to the second First Lady, when Abigail Adams found herself under attack from her husband’s political enemies because of her apparent interest in politics. The president’s political opponents resorted to calling Mrs. Adams by the monikers Her Majesty and Madame President, nicknames meant to be negative because of her perceived influence. Eleanor Roosevelt was also subjected to accusations of having too much power, and her high profile inspections of public facilities were followed by both her admirers and her critics. More recently, Nancy Reagan was called Queen Nancy and the Dragon Lady by those who questioned her perceived power in the Reagan White House, while Hillary Rodham Clinton’s role as her husband’s policy adviser was rebuked by her husband’s critics. As the first African-American First Lady, Michelle Obama endured a number of ugly, racist depictions of her on social media.

The criticism First Ladies have faced has come not only from the presidents’ political opponents but also from the press and larger public alike. At times, the attacks have transcended all notions of decency and have been highly personal and painful. For example, political satirists of the day depicted Margaret Taylor as something of a hick, smoking corncob pipes, while Eleanor Roosevelt was drawn with oversized buck teeth by insensitive cartoonists. Incredibly, even First Lady Ida McKinley’s epilepsy and Julia Grant’s crossed left eye were sources of criticism.

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A First Lady's actions, even when performed under noble circumstances, also invite controversy. Lou Hoover and Eleanor Roosevelt were attacked in the southern press for inviting African American guests into the White House. Betty Ford was ambushed by the media for her frank views on social problems of the day. To her critics, Betty answered that "Being ladylike does not require silence." While some First Ladies endured these criticisms and relentless public introspection better than others, most did, in fact, persevere. First Ladies can take solace in the fact that, despite the criticism, most of them have been enormously popular. Recent public opinion polls often show that the president's spouse enjoys higher approval ratings than the president, and she is typically shown to be included among the United States' most admired women.

Presidential Partners

Of course, it is not only in the public limelight that the First Lady's influence has been exercised. Rather, it appears that the presidential spouse has wielded considerable influence behind the scenes. She is, after all, the president's wife, and of all the presidential aides and advisers, none knows the commander-in-chief as well as the First Lady or has the access to the president that the First Lady enjoys. Unlike most presidential aides and advisers, the First Lady has generally been at the president's side long before his presidency or even his political career. The First Lady is family, and her influence extends beyond any formal jurisdiction such as a job title or description. This influence also goes beyond the confines of the office and working day.

The majority of First Ladies served as their husbands' most trusted confidante. Many presidential marriages were healthy and involved a shared interest by husband and wife in the husband's career. As opposed to the notions of a single-income family or dual-career family, first families often lead what can be de-

scribed as co-career marriages, wherein the spouse is an intimate part of the political career. White House wives have subordinated their own careers and interests to the co-career or "team." Even those First Ladies reluctant to participate in politics or public service have often found that they are forced into a political role, or at least the symbolic and social roles associated with being a political wife.

A total of twenty-seven presidential couples were married at least twenty years before entering the White House. First couples such as Andrew and Eliza Johnson, Benjamin and Caroline Harrison, the Eisenhowers, and the Carters all spent more than three decades together as husband and wife prior to the time they spent in presidential service. Others, such as George H. W. and Barbara Bush, the Washingtons, John and Abigail Adams, and William and Anna Harrison, spent in excess of four decades together as husband and wife. Even those First Ladies who died prior to their husbands' election to the presidency had spent many years with him and often were major forces in his life and pre-presidential political career. This behind-the-scenes, "pillow" influence is hard to gauge but has the potential to have a profound influence on presidents and presidential decision making.

What has emerged is an institution with great influence. The First Lady has become one of the United States' most recognizable and influential public figures. Several presidential spouses have played central roles in their husbands' political careers and presidencies and have been so intimately involved in all facets of the public office that they can best be described as "presidential partners." Abigail Adams, Sarah Polk, Helen Taft, Florence Harding, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, and Hillary Rodham Clinton all functioned as full partners in their husbands' presidencies. Each of these First Ladies campaigned for their husbands, supported their spouse's careers, offered political advice, edited political speeches,

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embraced and promoted their husband's policies, and served as the president's most trusted, closest political ally and confidante.

Because the Constitution is silent on the issue of the First Lady and relatively few legal parameters exist regarding the duties of the office, First Ladies have had little in the way of formal guidelines to follow in determining their approach to the office. Yet this does not mean that First Ladies have been free to function in a manner solely determined by themselves. First Ladies must formulate their approach to the office with consideration to the fickle winds of public opinion and major events of the day. Of course, because the First Lady derives her legitimacy through marriage, she must be mindful of the particular preferences of the president. There is also historical precedent to consider, as many early First Ladies contributed to the shaping of the office. The actions of all previous First Ladies continue to frame the nature of the role. However, the lack of legal guidelines and the wide array of styles, actions, and duties of First Ladies throughout history have forged an office that is still evolving and allows for a considerable degree of discretion by each particular First Lady. Each must consider her own talents and vision for the office in defining her particular First Ladyship. First Ladies can assume a number of roles in their husbands' administrations. Among them appear to be a core set of unwritten responsibilities, including social hosting, management of the White House, social activism on behalf of a pet project or issue, and general political and public support of the president, which may include public speaking, campaigning, and making public appearances.

The First Lady emerged in the twentieth century as an institution of the White House and of the American political system. Modern First Ladies have a sizable staff to serve them. Although many early First Ladies were active and wielded political influence, the "Office of the First Lady" is a twentieth century development, dating to the First Ladyship of Edith

Roosevelt (1901-1909). In response to the overwhelming amount of mail the First Lady received, she requested the assistance of an aide. Isabella Hagner James, a clerk in the Department of War, was reassigned to the First Lady, becoming the first permanent, nondomestic staffer working directly for the First Lady. In recent times, the First Lady's staff has grown to include roughly twenty employees who serve the First Lady in such capacities as press relations, scheduling, correspondence, and special projects.

The First Lady's staff offices are usually located in the East Wing, opposite the presidential offices in the West Wing of the White House. This has led some political observers to comment that the West Wing contains the brain of the American body politic, and the East Wing contains the heart. However, with the advent of a presidential partnership, a fusion of the two wings has occurred. In fact, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton even relocated her office to the West Wing. In so doing, she symbolically and physically completed this joining of the Office of the President and Office of the First Lady. Indeed, beginning around the time of Jackie Kennedy's service, the First Lady has enjoyed a staff, office space, and budget that exceed that appropriated for many of the so-called top presidential advisers.

Historically, spousehood was one of the few avenues to political power for women. Fortunately, women have made significant progress in virtually all sectors of American society and today serve in nearly every public office except the presidency. Still, the position of political spouse, especially presidential spouse, remains an avenue to political power. First Ladies have responded by using the office to advance a host of issues and causes and have made many important contributions to the United States. Spouses have shared power with the president to the extent that the First Ladies have at times operated as "the power behind the throne" of the presidency.

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A Legacy of Service

The First Ladies represent a somewhat diverse group of intriguing women. While it benefits our understanding of the presidency and the history of the United States to consider them, they are fascinating individuals in their own right. Their accomplishments are impressive, and their importance throughout American history is only now beginning to be fully appreciated.

First Ladies have served without pay and often at great personal expense. A few were reluctant political spouses who dreaded the prospect of living in the White House. The White House is, after all, an intimidating place, and one can count on losing any semblance of private life or normal family life while there. Several presidential spouses had little training to prepare them for the challenges of the presidency, and others were barely out of their teenage years. The trials and tribulations of the White House are difficult for even those in peak physical condition. Yet several wives of the presidents suffered from poor health prior to entering the White House, and others were well into their later years, often far beyond the average life expectancies for the day and age.

There are other challenges in serving one's country in this capacity. Four First Ladies lost their husbands as a direct result of presidential service. Mary Lincoln, Lucretia Garfield, Ida McKinley, and Jackie Kennedy all lost husbands to assassination while in office. The husbands of Anna Harrison, Margaret Taylor,

Florence Harding, and Eleanor Roosevelt suffered from poor health while in office and died before completing their full presidential terms. Eliza Johnson, Pat Nixon, and Hillary Rodham Clinton endured the ugly and highly public turmoil surrounding the impeachment or attempted impeachment of their husbands, and most First Ladies endured the intense public scrutiny and hostile political attacks on their spouses that seem to come with the office.

Still, First Ladies have endured. Most have succeeded. They have served largely without proper recognition. As a group, the First Ladies have generally been a capable lot, and considering their responsibilities, they have generally discharged their duties as well as, if not better than, the presidents. Their stories deserve to be told. It is time to recognize their accomplishments and for the First Ladies to assume their proper place in American history.

The essays that follow profile each of the First Ladies, beginning with Martha Washington, the first presidential spouse. There are also essays on major topical areas associated with the institution of the First Lady which offer the reader a larger, conceptual understanding of the office. The contributing authors have been selected to write for this encyclopedia because of their expertise on the subject and are recognized as leading scholars in this field of study. I hope you enjoy learning about those individuals who have served as American First Ladies.

Robert P. Watson, Consulting Editor

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Mary Lincoln

Mary Todd Lincoln

Born: December 13, 1818
Lexington, Kentucky
Died: July 16, 1882
Springfield, Illinois

President: Abraham Lincoln
1861-1865

Overview: Mary Lincoln continues to be one of the most controversial First Ladies in U.S. history. As the wife of Abraham Lincoln, the most admired of American presidents, Mary Lincoln serves as a tempestuous counterpoint to his depressed personality. Full of verve, wit, and high temper, she

was as ambitious as Lincoln was for his political success. She redecorated the public rooms of the White House and, in the process, overspent the budget for its repair. As First Lady, she was admired as an elegant social hostess. A devoted mother, she outlived three of her four children. After her husband's assassination, her surviving son, Robert Todd Lincoln, had her institutionalized for behavior that most historians believe displayed nervousness and instability but not insanity.



Mary Lincoln, circa 1861. (*Library of Congress*)

Early Life

Mary Todd was born on December 13, 1818, in Lexington, Kentucky, into a distinguished Kentucky family. Her grandfather Levi Todd had been one of the founders of Lexington, and among her uncles and earlier relatives were generals, planters, and political leaders. Her father, Robert Smith Todd, was a successful slave-owning cotton manufacturer and banker as well as an aspiring Whig politician who served in the Kentucky legislature. Her

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Mary Lincoln

mother's family, the Parkers, were equally distinguished and affluent. Both sides of the family had been among those ambitious settlers who flooded into Kentucky in the 1790's in order to take advantage of the state's fertile land and the commercial opportunities that arose in its leading city, Lexington.

Mary was the third daughter of Robert Smith Todd and Elizabeth Parker Todd's seven children. When Mary was six years old, her mother died of puerperal sepsis, the post-birth bacterial fever feared by nineteenth century women and called childbed fever.

The loss of her mother was the beginning of a series of tragic losses for Mary. She and her older sisters disliked her new stepmother, whom her father had married in 1828. A diligent and intelligent student, Mary excelled at both John Ward's local seminary and later at a boarding school in Lexington. There she learned French, as well as the school's curriculum of every branch of "good education," which included rigorous training in the traditional studies of reading, writing, and arithmetic as well as the home arts of embroidery and sewing. After twelve years of schooling, she was eager to leave Lexington, mostly because of her hostility to her stepmother. While she enjoyed

the social life in town, where women dressed formally to pay afternoon calls, she sought associations with those who were interested in politics and literature. Even in these early years of her life in Kentucky, neighbors and friends remembered this energetic, vivacious young woman's interest in politics.

In 1838 Mary traveled to Springfield, Illinois, to live with her older sister Elizabeth, who had married Ninian Edwards, an aspiring Whig politician and a political ally and friend of Abraham Lincoln. Like Mary Todd, Abraham was a newcomer to Springfield. While her sisters had encouraged her to come, Abraham had settled in the prairie town on his own because it was the new capital of Illinois. As a lawyer and ambitious Whig assemblyman, he benefitted from his associations with clients and politicians there. Soon Mary and Abraham were courting. Physically, they were very different. Mary was five feet, four inches tall, plump, brown-haired, and graced with an appealing, round face. Abraham was six feet, four inches tall, with black hair and a long, narrow face. No doubt Abraham was attracted by Mary's wit and lively conversation, as were several other leading politicians, including Stephen A. Douglas.

A Lifelong Interest in Politics

When Mary Todd was a young girl living in Lexington, Kentucky, one of her neighbors was the well-known Whig politician Henry Clay, who ran for president three times. One day, according to her relatives, young Mary rode her pony through Ashland, Clay's estate. When Clay told her that he might be moving to the White House, she responded that she, too, expected to move to Washington — as a president's wife.

This story reveals Mary's interest in public affairs at a time when women were supposed to remain in private life. Mary Todd Lincoln, like few other American women, sought a role in one of the central preoccupations of nineteenth century men. She wrote patronage letters for her husband, offering her advice. In May, 1860, when Abraham Lincoln was nominated for president by the Republican Party, reporters traveled to Springfield to learn more about "Honest Abe." In the simple Lincoln home, they found Mrs. Lincoln to be a well-informed spouse who, since her childhood, had enjoyed talking about politics.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was ambitious as a young man and intended to better himself. Growing up on isolated farms in Kentucky and Indiana as the son of a farmer, he had less than two years of formal education and was largely self-taught. When he moved to the small community of New Salem in 1832, his horizons broadened. When the Illinois capital moved to Springfield, Lincoln followed. Having been accepted into the Illinois bar association, he immediately combined the law and politics. After an initial defeat, he was four times elected as a Whig to the Illinois legislature. By the 1850's, he was well known in Illinois for his support of internal improvements as well as his principled stand against the extension of slavery into the territories. He was also sufficiently self-confident to have senatorial ambitions, although he was twice defeated for an Illinois senate seat. Meanwhile, his legal practice flourished.

By 1856, Lincoln had become a member of the newly created Republican Party. Lincoln now emerged as a powerful spokesman of a party whose bedrock position was to prevent the extension of slavery into the territories absorbed into the United States as a result of the Mexican War. As a result of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which provided for self-governance in the territories; the struggles in so-called Bleeding Kansas; and especially the 1857 Dred Scott decision by the U.S. Supreme Court that made slavery legal in all the territories, slavery seemed to be nationalized. Lincoln found this an appalling prospect which would destroy the democratic experiment based on freedom and liberty that the founders had created.

In a series of debates with U.S. senator Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln made history. Douglas argued for popular sovereignty and the right of white citizens to decide whether they would have slavery in their communities. In powerful speeches which gained him a reputation beyond the boundaries of his state, Lincoln, who despised slavery, argued that slavery must not be nationalized. As a result of his eloquent enunciation of an important northern principle, in the Republican nominating convention of 1860, he became his party's second choice for president. He was elected in 1860 in an unusual election in which four candidates ran.

Abraham also appreciated her interest in politics, which was unusual among women of this time. She found in him a man who would treat her with tolerance and understanding, and she certainly sensed in him the ambition that would lead him to the White House. Her family, the Edwardses, and Mary's sister Frances Wallace, who also lived in Springfield, objected to the match, believing Abraham Lincoln was not as wellborn as their sister. Despite the family's objections, a disruption in their courtship—occasioned by Mary's anger at Abraham's tardy arrival for a dance—and Abraham's own hesitations, twenty-four-year-old Mary Todd married thirty-three-year-old Abraham Lincoln on November 4, 1842. He gave her a ring inscribed Love Is Eternal.

Marriage and Family

Like most nineteenth century American women, after marriage Mary was soon absorbed in childbearing and raising and caring for her home and husband. Mary Todd Lincoln became pregnant almost immediately with her first son. Named after her father, he was born in August, 1843. Soon her second son, Edward Baker Lincoln, followed, but Eddie suffered from tuberculosis and died in 1850. In a pattern that suggests the Lincolns controlled their fertility, only after Eddie's death did Mary become pregnant again. William Wallace Lincoln was born in 1850, and because, as his mother said, he needed a playmate, Thomas Lincoln, called Tad, was born in 1853.

As the family grew, and with the financial

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Mary Lincoln

help of Mary's father, the Lincolns moved from the boardinghouse they first inhabited to a small cottage and finally to their famous Springfield home on Eighth and Jackson Streets. Because Lincoln's law practice took him to the courtrooms in counties throughout the Eighth Judicial District in central Illinois, Mary was responsible for running the house. In the nearly twenty years in which the Lincolns lived as a married couple in Springfield, Mary was well-known as an energetic housekeeper who worked hard to keep a clean, well-managed home. Like other middle-class women in Springfield, at various times she employed domestic servants to help with the endless tasks of cooking, cleaning, sewing, and the dreaded

Monday chores of washing and ironing. Yet Mary did most of the domestic labor in her household.

Like her husband, she was a permissive parent who was very much engaged with her children and who was ambitious for their success. Rarely did the sons of even Illinois's wealthiest families venture across the prairies to eastern universities, but both Abraham and Mary Lincoln wanted their sons to attend the best schools in the United States. Accordingly, in 1859, Robert left for Harvard University, where he failed his entrance exams and spent a post-graduate year at Phillips Exeter Academy before his admission to Harvard in 1860.

By the 1850's Abraham Lincoln's political



Abraham and Mary Lincoln with sons Robert and Tad. (*Library of Congress*)

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ambitions focused on a United States Senate seat. Earlier he had been elected as a Whig to Congress, where he served from 1847 to 1848. In an unusual decision that attests to her interest in politics, Mary and the boys accompanied him and lived in a Washington, D.C., boarding-house. In 1855 and again in 1859, Lincoln was defeated for election to the Senate. During this dry spell in his political career, Mary played a supporting role in his efforts. She entertained important state officials, wrote patronage letters, and perhaps most important, bolstered the spirits of her husband.

In May, 1860, Lincoln became the presidential nominee of the Republican Party. When delegates and reporters traveled to Springfield to inform him of his nomination, they found a talkative, intelligent informant in his wife. They also complimented her home as tasteful and graceful. In an age in which Americans were beginning to foster a celebrity culture, Mary Lincoln became public property subject to praise and blame from the press in her new role as First Lady.

Presidency and First Ladyship

In February, 1861, the Lincoln family traveled to Washington to take up residence in the White House. By this time, seven southern states had seceded from the Union, and the future of the republic was in doubt. In these turbulent times, as the train carrying the new president moved through the Midwest into New England and the Middle Atlantic states, crowds flocked to the stations in order to hear him and to see his family, in an age before photographs introduced the people to their leader. Everywhere Mary Lincoln appeared, cheers were heard from a crowd that sometimes saluted "Mrs. Abe." In Baltimore, however, the triumphant journey turned sour when rumors reached the presidential party of an assassination plot in that city. Within five weeks of their moving into the Executive Mansion, the Civil War began.

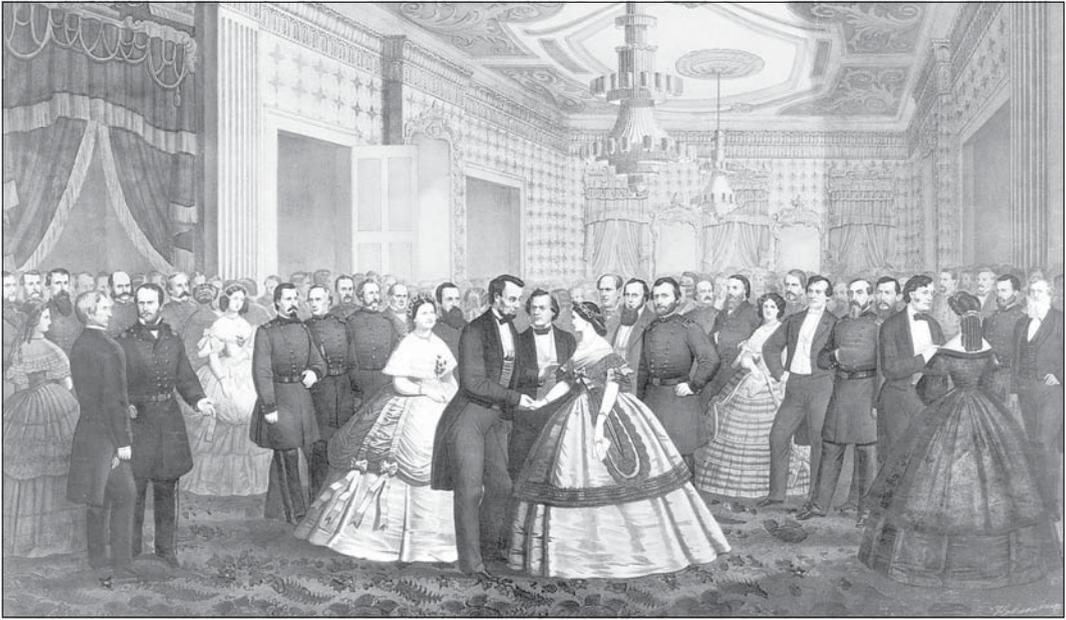
Once settled in the White House, Mary be-

gan to redecorate—a task that she believed necessary and important as a statement of the power of the Union. In previous administrations the White House had been neglected; its furniture and upholstery were dingy. The atmosphere of the White House became important during the Civil War, when the mansion played an essential role as a symbol of a powerful Union.

Mary, with the characteristic personal bravery that kept her in Washington even as other political wives returned home to safer sanctuaries, soon undertook her own campaign to improve the interior of the White House. She traveled to Philadelphia and New York in the spring of 1861 to choose new fabrics for the public rooms, and she ordered fancy wallpaper from a Paris house. She replaced the dusty rugs and hired Washington cabinetmakers to revarnish and fix the broken furniture that she, Willie, and Tad found in the attic. She also ordered a new, 190-piece set of Limoges china.

In the process she overspent the budget granted by Congress to the commissioner of public buildings. She also irritated her husband, who was furious at what he called her flub-a-dubs. Moreover, some newspapers accused her of trying to behave in the manner of a European queen. Unfairly and incorrectly, she was also accused of supporting the Confederacy, even of being a spy, because of her Kentucky heritage and the fact that her half brothers were fighting in the Confederate army.

Eventually, even her enemies had to agree that the restored public rooms of the White House were elegant. It was in the East Room and the Blue Room that Mary Lincoln presided over her receptions and soirees. Handsomely gowned in dresses and shawls which were often lent by shops that wanted advertisement of their wares, she was widely acknowledged as poised and sociable. According to servants, the White House was opened during the Lincoln years more often and to more Americans than in any previous administration. In March,



Abraham and Mary Lincoln greet Union generals, cabinet members, and others at their last reception, in 1865. (*Library of Congress*)

1865, more than two thousand Americans pushed into the White House to enjoy what became the last Lincoln reception.

Intensely interested in politics, Mary sometimes interceded with her husband's cabinet officers in order to gain various civilian and military posts for her family and friends. Once Secretary of State William H. Seward encouraged her to mind domestic affairs, but this First Lady believed that an interest in public issues was, in fact, her business. Her interest in matters beyond the usual fare of women is documented in the telegrams that Abraham sent her while she was away. They frequently mentioned military news which the president knew she would be interested in reading.

In the summers the Lincolns moved to the Old Soldiers Home outside Washington, where the air was considered cleaner and fresher. Mary, who traveled more than any other First Lady up to this time, also visited New England. When in Washington, she was,

like many other women, a frequent visitor to the Army hospitals, and she helped raise money to aid newly freed slaves who moved into Washington during the Civil War.

The White House was also home to a family with young children. In this era, with her husband's office on the second floor, Mary and the children had to step over the patronage seekers lining the halls in order to get to the seven rooms of the family quarters in the West Wing. With maternal sensitivity, Mary understood that Willie and Tad were isolated from other children and so she worked hard to find playmates for them. She was also concerned about her husband as he struggled to find a general and strategy. For the most part, recreation outside the White House took the form of visits to the theater or afternoon carriage rides around Washington.

The White House, for all its glories as a center of power during four years of war, soon brought sorrow to Mary Lincoln. In February,

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1862, eleven-year-old Willie died of typhoid fever. Both his parents were desolate. While the president could absorb Willie's death into a larger perspective of the sorrows of the time, his wife was unable to do so. Mary's fierce mourning rendered her incapacitated for months. Then in 1865, shortly after Lincoln's second inaugural and just as the war was ending, she saw her husband murdered as they watched the play *Our American Cousin* in Ford's Theatre.

Legacy

Again devastated by the abrupt loss of a loved one, Mary moved to Chicago with Tad. Later she traveled to Europe with Tad, who, after their return from Germany in 1871, died an agonizing death from pleurisy, the third of her sons to die before her. In 1875 Robert Lincoln had his mother committed to an insane asylum, and after her successful battle to be released, she moved to France. She returned the year before her death in 1882 to live with her sister Elizabeth Edwards in Springfield.

Her legacy as a First Lady involved her commitment to making the White House a statement of power and glory during a threatening period of American history. Ahead of her time, she turned the president's home as well as his public entertainments into symbolic statements of his authority and, through him, the power of the nation. It was a role that would bring future First Ladies acclaim, but in Mary's time it was an unusual obligation for First Ladies, who usually stayed out of the limelight. No one since Dolley Madison had taken such pains to fix up the White House and turn it into

a place where the American people—soldiers, politicians, and others—could meet the leader of the nation. Given her interest in public affairs, Mary Lincoln also represented a new kind of First Lady—one who was concerned with affairs beyond domestic life.

Suggested Readings

- Baker, Jean H. *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986. A largely sympathetic biography that looks at Mary Lincoln's life from her perspective.
- Brooks, Noah. *Washington, D.C., in Lincoln's Time*. 1895. Reprint. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971. Edited revision with new commentary by Lincoln biographer Herman Mitgang.
- Helm, Katherine. *Mary, Wife of Lincoln*. New York: Harpers, 1928. An engaging biography that includes family perspectives on Mary Lincoln.
- Randall, Ruth Painter. *Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1953. Based on excellent research, Randall's book discusses the Lincoln marriage with sympathy and understanding.
- Schreiner, Samuel A., Jr. *The Trials of Mrs. Lincoln*. New York: Donald A. Fine, 1987. An account of Mary Lincoln's later years. With an index.
- Turner, Justin, and Linda Leavitt. *Mary Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972. Although Mary Lincoln's letters continue to surface, this compendium serves as an excellent introduction to her life.

Jean Baker

First Ladies and Policy Issues

Overview: The notion of presidents' wives being involved in the public policy process is a phenomenon isolated to the latter part of the twentieth century. In the past, the lack of voting rights and educational opportunities for women contributed to a societal belief that women were not qualified to comment on political matters. The twentieth century brought with it women's suffrage, increasing standards of education for women, and substantial numbers of middle-class women entering the work force. As the role of women in society changed, the role of the First Lady changed as well.

History

Given the scant resources of the earliest First Ladies, it is not surprising that their role in shaping public policy was limited. This does not mean that the early First Ladies were inactive; rather, their roles were restricted to sponsoring charities and advising their husbands on policy decisions and political appointments. Historian Laura Holloway places the responsibility for this role with Martha Washington. She notes that:

Her sphere was limited entirely to social occupations, and possessing wealth and position, she gratified her taste. Had her character been a decided one, it would have stamped the age in which she flourished, for, as there never was but one Washington, so there will never come a time when there will be the same opportunities as Mrs. Washington had for winning a name and individuality.

Because Martha Washington did not seek to expand the role of the First Lady, it remained limited for a substantial time thereafter.

There are large differences in personalities and marital relationships among First Ladies as well as variations in their political and social environments. The participation of First Ladies

in the governmental process can be classified along two dimensions: their level of policy involvement and their level of independence from their spouses (the presidents). These distinctions enable us to separate First Ladies who were sources of influence and support for their husbands but had no interest in public policy from First Ladies who pursued more far-reaching agendas. The level of policy involvement will divide First Ladies into two groups: those who were involved in policy issues and those who were not. Non-policy issues are defined as charities or causes that are not controversial, whereas policy issues are substantive and more controversial. Issues such as children or mental health care advocacy are viewed as causes rather than policy issues because no one opposes children or aiding the mentally ill. Non-policy issues also include administrative matters such as presidential appointments, because these disputes often revolve around personalities rather than policies.

First Ladies will also be classified according to whether they pursued interests that were dependent on their husbands' agendas, or outside of the scope of their husbands' agendas. First Ladies who lobbied their husbands to adopt a particular course of action are consid-

Family Life in the White House

Overview: The lives and lifestyles of presidential families have changed considerably since the inauguration of George Washington in 1789. Through the years, traditions have evolved and family members have been forced to adopt a much more public presence. Much of this has been due to increased perception of the first family as public symbols, and the increased role of the First Lady as an integral component of the official machinery of the White House. Nonetheless, the most significant influences on family life continue to be the individual dynamics of each first family and the degree of politicization allowed by the president and First Lady.

History

The families who have lived in the White House have been quite varied. Presidents have surrounded themselves with groups that have ranged from only immediate family members to extended circles including presidential parents, cousins, nieces, nephews, and assorted other relatives. Some presidents were widowers or, in the case of James Buchanan, a bachelor, and hence had to appeal to relatives to assume social duties. Other first couples were childless but brought either adopted children or grandchildren to live at the White House.

In spite of the differences through the years, several common trends emerged which have defined family life in the White House. First, most first families have been smaller than contemporary averages. While Anna Harrison had 10 children, the average number of children in first families is just 3.5, and many first couples had only 1 child. James and Sarah Polk had no children; Warren and Florence Harding had no children together nor any who lived with them; and the bachelor James Buchanan was also childless. In addition, it should be noted that the children of Martha Washington and Dolley Madison came from previous marriages, and

many first couples had adopted children. Even Buchanan was the legal guardian of his niece and nephew when he entered the White House. Second, since the average age of First Ladies upon entering the White House was forty-seven, it has been very common for the first family to include grandchildren. Thomas Jefferson had seven grandchildren living with him, including James Madison Randolph, who was the first of ten presidential grandchildren born in the Executive Mansion through the twentieth century. Third, although the First Lady has no formal constitutional function, tradition and practical utility have meant that many First Ladies have involved themselves deeply in politics as formal or informal advisers to their husbands or as advocates for various causes, including their husbands' political fortunes. When both spouses have been politically involved, family life has been affected in a variety of ways, which range from lack of private time together to the unwanted politicization of private matters. Fourth, and finally, presidents have often turned to members of their extended family to serve in both social and official capacities in the White House. Buchanan and the widowers Jefferson, Andrew