

*Forgotten
First Ladies*



Forgotten First Ladies

The mission of the National First Ladies' Library is to educate the public about the lives, accomplishments and contributions of our nation's First Ladies. Many factors make the task overwhelmingly difficult. Women's history was not deemed important at the birth of our country. American women have come a long way from the days when they had no right to vote, could not divorce, inherit wealth, hold a job after marriage, own property, or have an equal education. Successful women married well, became social assets to their husbands and raised proper children; they were to be seen and not heard. But from what our research has taught us, very few, if any of the First Ladies can be categorized that way. Most all were highly educated for their time, born into wealth or prominence, and valued by their family and later their husbands. Some divorced, but most married for love and were partners to the men they knew would be President.



Forgotten First Ladies had all of the challenges we have come to expect in putting together an exhibit. However, the outcome is one that we also expected. The more that was learned about the women the more each was admired. The First Ladies in this exhibit were extraordinary individuals, and absolute assets to their husbands not only as wives, but as valued confidantes.

It should be noted that in all cases the First Ladies and Hostesses in this exhibit were prominent and admired during the President's administration. Some were controversial, but each was certainly known by Washington Society as well as the American public.

How, we might ask, can such women have been forgotten? We cannot answer that for you. But as time marches on the public's memory is very short. In *Forgotten First Ladies* we are presenting the ladies we have come to know. They are important because their stories are part of the story of our country, and we call that History.

Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson (1748 – 1782)



Of all the First Ladies, Martha Jefferson is truly lost to history. There are no images of her and few details survive of her brief life. Family lore states she was an auburn-haired beauty and had many suitors. She grew up the daughter of a wealthy Virginia plantation owner, John Wayles.

Martha was the daughter of his first wife, Martha Eppes, who died shortly after giving birth to her. Her father married two more times and outlived each wife. As the eldest daughter of a thrice-widowed father, Martha would have been well skilled in overseeing the household of a large plantation. Martha married for the first time at the age of 18 to Bathurst Skelton in 1766. The following year she was suddenly widowed with an infant son, John. Courted by many men, she chose the young lawyer Thomas Jefferson, but their wedding was postponed for six months after Martha's three year old son John died. The couple married on January 1, 1772, and drove through a snowstorm to Monticello where they spent their honeymoon. Nine months later the first of their six children was born; she was named for her mother Martha, but nicknamed "Patsy." Thus began a pattern

for the next 10 years for Martha – pregnancy, birth and death. Only two daughters, Patsy and Maria survived. Martha's health weakened with each pregnancy and she died four months after giving birth to her last child. Thomas Jefferson was devastated after her death on September 6, 1782. He destroyed most of their correspondence, rarely spoke of her, and never remarried. In one letter written two months after her passing he stated,"... [I have] lost the cherished companion of my life, in whose affections, unabated on both sides, I had lived the last ten years in unchequered happiness..."

Elizabeth Kortright Monroe (1768-1830)

Administration Dates: 1817 - 1825



Elizabeth Kortright was the daughter of a wealthy New Yorker. Little is known of her childhood. She was educated in French and Latin languages which served her well during her years living in Europe.

She was just shy of her 18th birthday when she married James Monroe in February of 1786. Their first daughter Eliza was born later that year. The newlyweds settled in Philadelphia, but in 1794 James became the US Ambassador to France under President George Washington's administration. The Monroes lived in France during the war-torn and often violent times of the French Revolution.

The one event that is well known about Elizabeth is that she bravely visited the imprisoned wife of General Marquis de Lafayette's wife, Adrienne, who was scheduled for execution at Le Plessis Prison in Paris – thus, saving her life. By the time Elizabeth became First Lady, she was suffering from poor health. Her eldest daughter, Eliza, often stood in for her as the official White House Hostess. Elizabeth disappointed Washington

high society by not returning calls as her predecessor, Dolley Madison had done. After her death, James Monroe and her family destroyed all her correspondence, leaving most of her life's history unknown.

Rachel Donelson Jackson (1767-1828)

Administration Dates: 1829 – 1837



Rachel Donelson was the ninth child and youngest daughter of eleven children born to Colonel John and Rachel Donelson. The prosperous family sold their plantation in Virginia in the fall of 1779, and the entire family and their slaves moved into the western wilderness of Tennessee. John Donelson

was the co-founder of present day Nashville, Tennessee. As a child of the frontier, Rachel received enough home schooling to enjoy a life-time of reading. When she was 17 she married Lewis Robards. Robards profound and unreasonable jealousy of his lovely wife proved too much for the marriage, and Rachel moved back into her mother's home. An attempt by the couple to reconcile failed, and in 1790 Robards filed for divorce. By this time, Rachel had met Andrew Jackson and the two had fallen in love. In 1791, Andrew and Rachel began to live together as a married couple – an accepted custom in frontier fashion. The divorce was not granted until 1794, and afterwards Andrew and Rachel were quietly and legally married. This event would come to haunt the Jacksons as Andrew's political star rose. In what is considered by some historians to be the ugliest presidential campaign in our nation's history, the campaign of 1828 is also noteworthy as the first time a politician's wife was the target of a smear campaign. The anti-Jackson side proclaimed Rachel was an "adulteress, bigamist, and a whore." As a deeply religious and well-respected woman in Tennessee, Rachel would have been

deeply dismayed by the very public and negative attention. Still, she was preparing to leave for Washington when she suffered a heart attack and died on December 22, 1828. She was buried in her inaugural gown. Andrew Jackson, known for his temper, never forgave his foes for their viciousness toward his wife. He mourned Rachel until his own death, sixteen years later.

Hannah Hoes Van Buren (1783 – 1819)



Similar to Martha Jefferson, there is little known about Hannah Hoes Van Buren. She grew up in the Dutch community of Kinderhook, New York. She was bilingual, speaking Dutch at home and English outside of her community. She was very active in the Dutch Reform church she attended. Distantly related to

her husband, Martin Van Buren, the two were married in 1807. They moved to Hudson, New York the following year as Martin began to forge ahead in politics. Hannah gave birth to six children in less than 10 years; a daughter and a son both died in infancy. At some point in a weakened state in 1816, Hannah contracted tuberculosis. Tuberculosis was known as “consumption” since the body progressively wasted away. The disease claimed Hannah’s life before her 36th birthday, on February 5, 1819. Martin Van Buren never remarried. Her name cannot be found in his 800 page autobiography.

Angelica Singleton Van Buren (1818-1877)

Administration Dates: 1837 – 1841

Angelica Singleton was raised on a prosperous plantation in South Carolina. Her parents believed strongly in educating their daughters, and Angelica attended fine schools in South Carolina and Philadelphia. She was known as a dark haired beauty with



impeccable manners and grace. Her distant cousin, former First Lady Dolley Madison played matchmaker by inviting her to the Washington social season in 1838. Introduced at a private dinner at the White House, Angelica caught the attention of President Van Buren's eldest son, Abraham.

Their romance quickly led to marriage in November of that same year. By the next social season, 21 year old Angelica was the official White House Hostess. Afterwards she and Abraham took a trip through Europe, where Angelica received celebrity status as a guest of nobility. She incorporated some of the more formal European etiquette she'd observed overseas into her duties as hostess, which was met with criticism by Washington society. After leaving the White House in 1841, Angelica gave birth to three sons who lived into adulthood. In 1849, she and Abraham settled in New York City. Angelica was distraught by her ties to the south during the Civil War, and consoled herself by making blankets for prisoners on both sides of the war. She lost many South Carolina nephews during that time. She did much charity work throughout her life. By the time of her death in 1877, she'd lived more than half of her life in New York. She was buried in the Bronx's Woodlawn Cemetery.

Anna Symmes Harrison (1775-1864)

Administration Date: 1841



Anna Symmes' mother died shortly after her birth. Anna and her older sister were raised by their maternal grandparents in New York. Fortunate to be daughters of John Symmes, a wealthy colonel of the American Revolution, both received excellent

educations. Anna would put her schooling to good use as she raised her family in the rugged western frontier. In 1794 she went with her father to the Northwest Territory and settled in the Cincinnati, Ohio area. Shortly afterwards she met a hero of the Northwest Territory Indian Wars, Captain William Henry Harrison. The two eloped in 1795, and thus began Anna's life as a military wife and mother in the harsh and isolated conditions of a hostile wilderness. Though little is known of Anna's life, clearly she was resilient, brave and smart. She successfully gave birth, fed, clothed and educated ten children. She followed and supported her husband as his military and political star rose. She was preparing to follow him once again to Washington, DC in 1841 when he was elected president. However, Harrison died of pneumonia 30 days after delivering his inaugural address. Anna lived another 24 years; in fact, she outlived all but one of her children. Her remaining letters reveal an opinionated and politically savvy woman.

Letitia Christian Tyler (1790-1842)

Administration Dates: 1841 – 1842



Letitia Christian grew up on a plantation in Virginia. There is no record of her formal education; however, she definitely knew how to run a successful plantation. Her abilities allowed her husband, John Tyler, to successfully advance through the political ranks. She became engaged to John when she was 18, but her family insisted on a long engagement and the two were married five years later in 1813. Shortly afterwards, John inherited his father's plantation where they raised their family. She gave birth to eight children, and seven lived to adulthood. John was away from home serving in Washington during most of those years, so Letitia had the lion's share of the

responsibility in running the large household. Letitia suffered a devastating stroke in 1839 that left her incapacitated. John Tyler planned on commuting to Washington during his term as Vice-President, but when William Henry Harrison died only 30 days into his term, the surprised Tyler family moved into the elevator-less White House. Letitia remained wheelchair-bound in the upstairs family rooms while her daughter-in-law Priscilla Cooper Tyler filled in as active White House Hostess. The one and only public appearance Letitia made was to attend the wedding of her daughter Elizabeth in the East Room in January of 1842. She died in the White House that September. As the first wife to die of a sitting President, the First Lady's death was noted in newspapers throughout the country.

Julia Gardiner Tyler (1820-1889)

Administration Dates: 1844 – 1845



Julia Gardiner was used to controversy by the time she married President John Tyler. Quiet dignity was the standard for a daughter of a wealthy East Hampton New Yorker. In 1839, 18 year old Julia secretly posed for an advertisement drawing of a dry goods store. The print not only named Julia as the model, but dubbed her "The Rose of Long Island." It was such a scandal that her parents sent her on a long tour of Europe. When she returned, her parents took her to Washington for the social season of 1842-43 where her beauty was greatly admired, especially by the newly widowed President Tyler. His marriage proposal was refused just as she continually rejected the proposals from her numerous other suitors. That changed when her father was killed by a gun explosion during a Presidential party cruise aboard the frigate *Princeton*. The tragedy brought President Tyler and Julia close; soon they

were secretly engaged. They were privately married in June of 1844. The 30 year age difference between the President and his new bride raised the eyebrows of Washington society. Julia thoroughly enjoyed her eight months as First Lady where she introduced a new dance at the White House – the polka. She gave birth to seven children after Tyler's retirement. The Tylers supported the formation of the Confederacy, and after Tyler's death in 1862 Julia lost everything in the war. Eventually, in 1881, she was awarded a government pension as a presidential widow which eased her poverty.

Sarah Childress Polk (1803-1891)

Administration Dates: 1845 – 1849



Sarah Polk was the first First Lady who clearly took an active role in her husband's political career. In a time when most women were confined to the role of wife and mother, Sarah served as her husband's secretary and loyal supporter even though she could not take part in campaigning or vote for him. Sarah and James

Polk never had children, so Sarah was free to indulge in her political interests and was even encouraged by her husband. Sarah grew up on a wealthy Tennessee plantation and was given an excellent education by her doting father. James Polk's political career was advancing when they married in 1824. She was a poised and respected member of Washington society during the many years James served in Congress. Sarah was devoted to his career and assisted with his speeches, correspondence and business affairs. Her intelligence and practicality was respected by James, and he trusted her judgment above all others. This role increased heavily when she became First Lady as James, a very hard-worker, thoroughly exhausted himself during his four year presidential term. James died in 1849, only three months

after retiring from Washington. Sarah lived another 42 years, preserving her husband's legacy in their home at Polk Place in Tennessee and welcoming all who visited. During the Civil War she took a neutral stance, and her home was hallowed ground for soldiers on both sides. She retained an active interest in politics and current affairs throughout her long life.

Margaret Smith Taylor (1788-1852)

Administration Dates: 1849 – 1850



Margaret Smith, known as “Peggy,” grew up on a wealthy plantation in Maryland, but nothing is known of her education. She married Lieutenant Zachary Taylor in 1810 when she was 21, and she spent most of her married life following her husband from one military camp to another in the remote

western wilderness. She gave birth to seven children, but two toddler daughters died in 1820 from a “bilious fever.” Margaret sent her remaining children to live with relatives so they could attend formal schools. Evidently living life in secluded isolation was her preference, and she was devoted to her husband and his career. By the time she became First Lady, she remained upstairs in the private White House family quarters and happily had her youngest daughter Betty serve as the official Hostess for public entertaining. A woman of deep faith, she attended daily services at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington, but she was rarely recognized. Considered a frontier recluse by Washington society, rumors spread that she sat upstairs and smoked a corn cob pipe. Not so, claimed her grandson; in fact, according to him she could not tolerate pipe smoke. President Taylor’s sudden death in 1850 devastated Margaret. She left Washington quickly and quietly, and died at her daughter Betty’s home in Mississippi in 1852.

Abigail Powers Fillmore (1798-1853)

Administration Dates: 1850 – 1853



Abigail Powers grew up in poverty after her father died a few years after her birth. However, his book collection served to instill a lasting love of books in his daughter. Abigail grew up to become a teacher, first in a public school and later in a private girl's school. She met Millard Fillmore, two years her junior, when

he became one of her students in Sempronius, New York. Abigail encouraged him to pursue his aspirations in law. Romance eventually grew between the couple, and they were married in 1826. Abigail continued to teach until her oldest child was born. It was highly unusual for a woman to work after marriage, and Abigail is the first First Lady to do so. She also helped establish a circulating library near her home, a prototype of today's public library. Always a student, Abigail learned to play the piano and speak French while raising her two children. A broken ankle that never properly healed kept her from being physically active. By the time she became First Lady, the long hours spent standing for large White House social events caused her great pain. Her daughter Abbie often filled in for her at these times. Abigail favored more intimate entertainment in the Yellow Oval Room on the second floor. This favorite room was also where she established the first White House Library. Twenty-four days after leaving the Executive Mansion Abigail died from pneumonia. For the first time Congress adjourned in mourning for a former First Lady.

Eliza McCardle Johnson (1810-1876)

Administration Dates: 1865 – 1869



Eliza McCardle grew up an only child of parents of modest means in Greeneville, Tennessee. She attended public school and must have been a good student, for she helped her husband, Andrew Johnson, to refine his spelling after their marriage. She married Andrew in 1827 when she was

16 years old. Eliza assisted Andrew in his tailor shop, all the while encouraging his interest in public debate. Her husband's successful advancement in politics had much to do with her ability to budget the home front finances while raising a family of five children. She had her last child at forty years of age; in a weakened state, she contracted tuberculosis and could no longer withstand prolonged exertion. Eliza and her children became war refugees in their hometown during the Civil War due to Andrew's unpopular position that Tennessee should remain loyal to the Union. She endured the confiscation of her home, and the deaths of a son and son-in-law before being reunited with Andrew in Nashville. She remained there when Andrew was sworn in as Vice-President in 1865 at the beginning of President Lincoln's second term. When the family moved into the White House after Lincoln's assassination in 1865, Eliza chose to run the proceedings behind the scenes while her oldest daughter, Martha Patterson, served as official White House hostess. Eliza refused to let impeachment proceedings against her husband affect official entertaining because she was confident he would be acquitted. Once his term ended, Eliza was relieved the ordeal was finally over, and overjoyed to leave Washington to return to Greeneville.

Ellen Herndon Arthur (1837 – 1880)



Ellen Herndon was born with the gift of music. It was her beautiful contralto voice that captured the heart of her future husband Chester Arthur. Not much is known of her education, but she was an only child from a family of wealth and prestige. As a young girl her family moved to Washington, DC where

she was a noted member of the youth choir at St. John's Church on Lafayette Square. Her family moved to New York, where she met and married Chester Arthur in 1859. Chester made headway through the political ranks of New York thanks mainly to the elite connections of his wife. Ellen bore three children, but the eldest died before his third birthday. Ellen continued singing throughout her life – mainly for charity benefits. She died from pneumonia on January 12, 1880. In November, Chester was elected Vice-President on the Garfield/Arthur ticket while still grieving the loss of Ellen. He remarked, "Honors to me now are not what they once were." Chester Arthur assumed the presidency after the assassination of President James Garfield on September 19, 1881.

Mary Arthur McElroy (1841-1917)

Administration Dates: 1883 – 1885



Mary Arthur McElroy was the youngest sister of President Chester Arthur. Known as "Molly" by the family, she was raised in Greenwich, New York. At the age of 19 she married John McElroy, an insurance broker from Albany. Mary was busy raising four children when her sister-

in-law, Ellen Arthur, died. Mary became the guardian for Chester and Ellen Arthur's young daughter Nell. Nell lived with her aunt's family in Albany when Arthur became president. At first President Arthur had no official hostess. The country was still reeling from President Garfield's assassination, and the White House was undergoing renovations. However, Arthur asked Mary,

his daughter Nell, and Mary's children to move into the White House for the last two social seasons of his administration. Mary was a very successful hostess, and even shared the spotlight by honoring former First Ladies Julia Tyler, Julia Grant, and Harriet Lane at private and public events. Chester Arthur died a year after he left office, in 1886, and Mary raised Nell as one of her own. She returned to Albany, New York for good and remained active in her community until her death at age 76.

To learn more about these First Ladies visit our website at www.firstladies.org. Additional information can be obtained through C-Span's First Ladies: Influence and Image series (firstladies.c-span.org)

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The James K. Polk Home & Museum, Columbia, Tennessee

The James Monroe Museum, Fredericksburg, Virginia

Forgotten First Ladies

January 20 - September 11, 2015

TOURS

All tours are guided and include both the changing exhibits at the Education & Research Center and the Saxton McKinley House, the restored Victorian home of President William and First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley. Tours last approximately 1 1/2 hours.

Tour Hours: Tuesday - Saturday at 9:30 & 10:30 a.m. and 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m., plus Sundays in June, July & August at 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m. **Tours begin at the Education & Research Center, 205 Market Avenue S.**

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