

In-laws in White House may add new meaning to domestic policy

By [Greg Toppo](#), USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — As they stare down their big move to the White House on Jan. 20, Michelle and Barack Obama face a sea of important decisions: [Which church to attend?](#) Anyone know a good organic chef? [Standard poodle or goldendoodle?](#)

Historians also are hanging on another question: mother-in-law or no mother-in-law?

The family says they expect Michelle Obama's mother, Marian Robinson, to leave her native Chicago early next year and move to Washington to help care for their two daughters — a job she held throughout the presidential campaign.

"If somebody's going to be with these kids other than their parents, it better be me," she told *The Boston Globe*.

It isn't clear whether Robinson will move into the White House; neither she nor Michelle Obama would comment.

If she does take up residence with the first family, they'll doubtless face a fair share of ribbing from late-night comedians. A sample so far:

- From Jay Leno: "Barack Obama's mother-in-law might be moving into the White House with him. See, Joe Biden was right: Hostile forces *will* test him in the first few months."
- From David Letterman: "A mother-in-law in the White House? Honestly? I thought this was the administration that was against torture."

But in the end, says Cambridge University psychologist Terri Apter, the multigenerational Obamas could help make extended families visible again.

"It seems unusual for Michelle Obama's mother to move in. You say, 'Oh, my goodness, this doesn't fit my idea of a family.' And yet it is highly consistent with a lot of real families."

Multigenerational families represent 3.6% of households, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent survey in 2007, which is up from 2.2% in 2000. An estimated 3.6 million parents live with their grown children, the Census Bureau says.

CENSUS: [More parents moving in with kids](#)

Apter acknowledges the strains that in-laws bring. Her forthcoming book is titled *What Do You Want From Me?* But she says more families than we may realize operate like the Obamas.

"Grandparents have an enormously strong emotional tie to their grandchildren, and they also are caretakers far more than you would expect," she says.

If Robinson moves in this January, she won't be the first. Several mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law have hauled their steamer trunks up the stairs of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. over the past 200 years or so. But if Robinson aspires to be the Most Outrageous White House In-Law, she had better take a number.

The in-laws through history

It turns out that the Kennedyesque notion of a small, attractive nuclear family living in the White House is so late-20th-century. Before that, presidents routinely invited extended

family members to stay at the White House for a month or two or longer, says William Bushong, staff historian for the non-profit White House Historical Association.

Andrew Jackson "brought just about everybody in his family with him from Tennessee to Washington," he says.

In his more than 12 years in office, Franklin D. Roosevelt practically used the White House as a hotel, Bushong says. "He just loved company." To accommodate their 13 grandchildren, Eleanor Roosevelt had slides, swings and sandboxes built on the South Lawn.

Historians likely would dub Frederick Dent the first extended-stay in-law. Dent, father of Julia Grant and father-in-law of Ulysses S. Grant, was a former planter and was for several years "a fixture at the White House," Bushong says, where he was mostly known for "promising people things he couldn't deliver," such as government contracts.

Most historians agree the title for Most Outrageous First Mother-in-Law in any century easily could be bestowed upon Madge Gates Wallace.

The mother of Elizabeth "Bess" Wallace Truman and mother-in-law of Harry S. Truman, Wallace is described in David McCullough's 1993 biography, *Truman*, as "a neat, straight little woman with a rather sweet expression, her hair done up in a knot, who still wore an old-fashioned velvet choker. Among the neighbors, she was perceived as possibly the most perfect lady in town and 'a very, very difficult person.' "

Myra Gutin, a historian at Rider University in New Jersey, is more direct: "She was a nasty son of a gun. She would frequently say, after her son-in-law became president, that it was in large measure because he married Bess."

While Truman was vice president, the family — Harry, Bess, their daughter, Margaret, and Mrs. Wallace — all lived in a five-room Washington apartment. (This was before the vice president got his own residence.)

After Truman moved into the White House upon the death of FDR, Wallace took a guest room over the North Portico, but she hated it, McCullough writes. After less than a month, she and the other Truman women packed up, boarded a train and spent the summer — and most summers thereafter — in their native Independence, Mo.

Though Truman helped end World War II, rebuild Europe, contain communism and win a legendary 1948 upset re-election over Thomas Dewey, historians say Wallace never really gave him much credit. In fact, she famously thought Dewey would win.

"She was always talking about 'that nice Tom Dewey,' " Gutin says.

In 1951, after Truman fired Gen. Douglas MacArthur for insubordination, Wallace asked why "Harry had fired that nice man," says historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony of the National First Ladies Library.

Appreciate what she has done

Wallace may epitomize the sharp-tongued mother-in-law of legend, but Cambridge psychologist Apter says not much research on mothers-in-law has been done in the USA compared with studies of the extended family elsewhere.

"It seems like it's something we like studying in other cultures and not so much in ours," she says.

One thing is crystal-clear: The mother-in-law-as-battle-ax motif goes back millennia. The Roman poet Juvenal makes reference to "the endless din of mothers-in-law."

Apter has been studying the interactions of 49 married couples and their in-laws for 15 years. Her findings: The most difficult relationship is often between the wife and her husband's mother.

How bad can it get? In Italy, for example, a husband's inability to protect his wife from his mother is now grounds for divorce.

Apter says Robinson and the Obamas have one huge advantage to getting along in the White House: At 55,000 square feet with 132 rooms, 35 of them bathrooms, the house is very, very big. "That helps, and it's already staffed."

Housework, a big in-law issue, probably won't come up at the White House.

Apter's prescription for peace within the first family: "Appreciate what (Robinson) has done as a mother." That'll go a long way toward reassuring her that she won't be "edged out" of the family.

Robinson, 71, retired in 2007 from a part-time job at a Chicago bank. For now, she lives in the same South Side home where she and her late husband raised Michelle and her brother, Craig.

During the campaign, the Obamas said that Robinson virtually made the presidential run possible. In February, Michelle Obama told voters in Ohio she was "standing here, breathing in and out with any level of calm" because her mother was home with the girls.

From what small glimpses we've seen of her so far, Robinson seems as candid as Madge Wallace, although without a trace of Wallace's disdain for her son-in-law. She told USA TODAY in August that after months of getting upset about the TV coverage of the family, she was watching *Frasier* reruns.

Asked how she felt about relocating with her daughter to Washington, she told the *Globe*: "I will do whatever she needs me to do. ... I'll be mad, but I'll do it."

When the topic turned to discipline for Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7, who are fed organic meals and watch no more than one hour of TV a night, Robinson confided:

"I have candy, they stay up late — come to my house, they watch TV as long as they want to. We'll play games until the wee hours. I do everything that grandmothers do that they're not supposed to."