

*This summary is by Carl Sferrazza Anthony*

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For most of the next half-century, the primary role of a president's wife was to be the hostess in her home — the White House — not only for private guests, but also for the general public at open-house receptions. Recognizing the citizenry as her constituency, the ebullient hostess Dolley Madison (1809-1817) relished her public role. Known as "Lady Madison," recalling the title bestowed on Martha Washington, she became the standard against which later First Ladies were judged.

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## **First Ladies, A Short History**

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the ebullient hostess Dolley Madison (1809-1817) relished her public role. Known as “Lady Madison,” recalling the title bestowed on Martha Washington, she became the standard against which later First Ladies were judged.

The term First Lady was first used in print in the March 31, 1860, issue of Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper in reference to Harriet Lane (1857-1861), the White House hostess for her bachelor uncle, President James Buchanan.

But the title was not used in a speech until the arrival of Lucy Hayes (1877-1881), the first college graduate in that role and the first to join a president on an extensive national whistle-stop tour. She was referred to as First Lady by one Rev. Stuart Robertson, who was introducing her husband, Rutherford B. Hayes. The title has been in regular use since the young, attractive and wildly popular Frances Folsom Cleveland (1886-1889, 1893-1897) married Grover Cleveland in a White House wedding.

Increasing public interest in a First Lady’s activities reflected the mid-19th-century shift from the hostess and ceremonial duties to a more overtly political role. In the weeks before her husband’s inauguration, Mary Lincoln (1861-1865) was the subject of extensive newspaper analysis that addressed gossip about her. Correspondents covered her throughout the Civil War, and she received more press attention than all her successors combined. The coverage included everything from her work as a Union Army nurse to her self-defense against charges that she sympathized with the Confederacy to her inspection of new lifeguard methods at a beach to her review of Union troops. But the press did not cover Mrs. Lincoln’s abolitionist activities.

Only later did the First Ladies become publicly identified with large social issues. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union put pressure on the bookish Lucretia Garfield Garfield (March-September 1881), for example, and even on the invalid Ida McKinley (1897-1901) to support its movement against alcohol.

Women’s suffrage, however, dominated as the political issue on which First Ladies were expected to state their views. Most opposed it. The first to offer qualified support for it, Helen (Nellie) Taft (1909-1913), proved to be a genuine Progressive era reformer. She demonstrated her political partnership with her husband, President William Howard Taft, by making history as the first presidential spouse to sit beside her husband in the Inaugural parade. She worked with the National Civic Federation, which brought organized labor and industrial leaders together, and eventually became the first First Lady to prompt federal legislation (workplace health and safety regulations). She created the famous cherry blossom tree grove where she organized public concerts for all classes and races to mingle, and attended Congressional hearings on police abuses against mill workers.

In today’s mind, Eleanor Roosevelt (1933-1945), with her willingness to face criticism by addressing controversial issues, was the First Lady who shattered all precedents to redefine the role for a modern age. But other First Ladies with less successful husbands also forged new paths. Florence Harding (1921-1923) was the first to speak on the record

with reporters, to fly in an airplane, and to issue statements encouraging women's political activism and economic empowerment. She was also the first to identify publicly with the lives of the middle-class majority rather than the elite — an important element of the modern role.

The advent of television thrust the role of First Lady into the realm of public celebrity. Young, stylish Jacqueline Kennedy's (1961-1963) televised tour of her White House restoration project not only gave people the first sustained exposure to a First Lady, but established the expectation that she assume a specific public work. Lady Bird Johnson's (1963-1969) well-crafted beautification efforts (in reality, a pioneering effort in environmental protection) resulted in federal legislation.

Playing a leadership role in promoting legislation has proved an uncertain role for modern First Ladies. Betty Ford (1974-1977) lobbied state legislatures to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, and Hillary Clinton (1993-2001) was head of a commission to change national health care. Neither effort ultimately succeeded in achieving their ultimate goals. On the other hand, Rosalynn Carter (1977-1981) made steady progress on her campaign promise to overhaul mental health care, and federal legislation resulted.

Barbara Bush, on the other hand, pursued her cause of reducing illiteracy as a way of addressing social problems of her era including AIDS, teenage pregnancy and homelessness, without pushing government action; by and large, this earned her personal admiration without courting political controversy.

Few First Ladies would disagree that the greatest potential for exercising power is personal influence with their spouse. While Edith Wilson's (1915-1921) control of the presidency after her husband had a stroke remains a dangerous example of such unaccountability by a First Lady, Nancy Reagan's (1981-1989) urging of her husband to forge a personal friendship with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union ended with positive results.

The wild card of the executive branch of government in terms of how politically consequential a First Lady might prove to be during her tenure, the role has been part of the presidency since its inception and, no matter how the job evolves in the future, is unlikely to disappear.

*Carl Sferrazza Anthony is the author of nine books, including the two-volume "First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power," and is historian for the National First Ladies Library.*