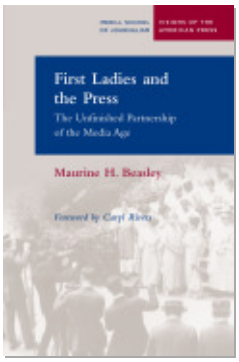
2. Early First Ladies and the Public Sphere



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TWO

EARLY FIRST LADIES AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

From the days of George Washington to the present, presidents' wives have found themselves in the public eye, subject to journalistic appraisal of their behavior. As the wife of the nation's first chief executive, Martha Washington was expected to fulfill the ceremonial role performed by royalty in European courts yet personify the simple dignity appropriate for a republican form of government. Presiding with her husband at state functions following his inauguration in 1789, she scripted a part played by each of her successors: hostess for the nation. While presidents' wives today extend their roles in various directions, official entertaining remains a prime responsibility. So does the presentation of a suitable image for their husbands' administrations.

A plantation mistress and one of the richest widows in the colonies at the time of her marriage to George Washington in 1750, Martha Washington took seriously her position as the president's partner but modestly described herself as "an old-fashioned Virginia house-keeper." While keeping a distance from politics, she knew that she and her husband

would be carefully watched to see if they set a tone for the new government that would command respect from leaders of the older countries of the world. As Margaret Truman, the daughter of President Harry S Truman, put it, "The first first lady thus became a major player in bridging the murky gap between presidential dignity and democratic accessibility—a role other first ladies have continued with varying degrees of success to this day."

Becomingly dressed in white to denote simplicity rather than queenly elegance, Washington served as her husband's consort for staid dinners and receptions in New York, the first capital. Her presence, enhanced by two grandchildren who often accompanied her, brought public adulation and solidified her husband's image as a family man. Yet her position restricted her movements and made her a target for the political press of the day that attacked her husband.

There was uncertainty over her title. Should she be called "the presidentess," "Lady President," or even "Marquise"? Finally, officials settled on "Lady Washington," the name used by cheering crowds when she had traveled from Mount Vernon to join her husband. "Lady," however, conveyed visions of British nobility and was discarded by subsequent administrations. (The term emerged again in the nineteenth century when the designation "first lady" became accepted.)

In the presidential residence, Martha Washington complained, as many of her successors have done, of limitations on her personal freedom. She wrote in a letter in October 1789, "I never go to any public place, indeed I am more like a state prisoner than anything else. There [are] certain boundaries set for me which I must not depart from." In a letter two

months later, she resolved to be happy in spite of the fact that "I, who had much rather be at home, should occupy a place [with] which a great many younger and gayer women would be prodigiously pleased."

When the capital moved to Philadelphia in 1790, her Friday night assemblies drew the attention of newspaper editors who usually ignored the activities of women. Unlike President Washington's receptions, which were limited to male officials, her "drawing rooms" presumably were private parties since women were invited, but the press considered them fair game for comment. According to contemporaries, she sat on a slightly raised platform and greeted women guests with a nod after each made "a most respectful curtsy." Guests were expected to sit silently as they waited for President Washington to make his rounds, saying a few words to each one. Supporters of George Washington's Federalist party lauded her conduct of a "Republican court" and praised her "unassuming" and "unaffected" personality.

In contrast, editors representing the anti–Federalist party led by Thomas Jefferson attacked her gatherings. Perhaps fearing the influence of women in politics, which he had witnessed disdainfully while a diplomat in Paris, Jefferson disliked Martha Washington's assemblies. The *National Gazette,* the mouthpiece of his Democratic-Republican party, placed her "levees," according to one writer, as "number two in the ten warning signs of creeping monarchy and aristocracy."

Political opponents also complained that she rode in a cream-colored coach that smacked of royalty; it had the Washington coat of arms and was drawn by six handsome horses and attended by liveried grooms. Anti-Federalists

fumed when she sent out engravings titled "Lady Washington" that showed her wearing a high headdress called a "Queen's Nightcap." Apparently intended for the Federalist press, the engravings marked the start of what eventually would become common practice: the furnishing of an image of a president's wife to the media of her era. In response, Washington gave up plans for her correspondence to be marked with a coat-of-arms seal. This incident was the first of many times to come when a president's wife modified her behavior in the face of press disapproval. When George Washington made his precedent-setting decision to vacate the presidency after two terms, his wife happily returned with him to Mount Vernon.

Her successor, Abigail Adams, took a different approach to the role of being the president's spouse, acting as a political as well as a domestic and social partner to her husband. When John Adams was serving in the Continental Congress that drafted the Declaration of Independence, Abigail Adams, who had been left to run the family farm back in Massachusetts, urged him to support legal rights for women. She wrote, "Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could." Adams responded, partly in jest, "Depend on it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. . . . We have only the name of masters, and rather than give this up, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope George Washington and all our brave heroes would fight." She then countered, "I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to

Men, Emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining absolute power over Wives."

Adams's opponents, however, questioned who wielded the power in the Adams household. Rather than "Lady Adams," they sarcastically called the wife "Mrs. President" or even "Her Majesty," marking the first but hardly the last time a president's spouse would be attacked for exercising influence over her husband. As Edith Mayo, a Smithsonian expert on first ladies, expressed it, "Such discomfort with a first lady's voice in the business of the nation has changed very little over most of the nearly two hundred years that followed."

Since John Adams had been vice president under Washington, Abigail Adams had witnessed Martha Washington's performance at close hand and doubted she had the "patience, prudence, [or] discretion" to follow her predecessor. Nevertheless, she served as an economical hostess who watched the family finances as well as an unofficial adviser who received numerous requests to recommend individuals for government jobs, which she contended she did not do. Both she and her husband encountered hostility from political opponents who found them more convenient targets than the revered Washingtons.

Stung by criticism, she took as personal affronts anti-Federalist newspaper stories that attacked her family as well as her husband, claiming that her children and in-laws had received favored treatment from the Federalists in power. In 1798, midway through her husband's sole term, she experienced a four-month-long mental and physical collapse. It hurt Abigail to see herself and John referred to in print as "Darby and Joan," the subjects of an English ballad about an elderly couple oblivious to the world around them. She

could hardly believe that editors would call the president "old, querulous, Bald, blind, crippled Toothless Adams." As a surreptitious counterattack, she asked her circle of personal correspondents to send copies of documents supporting Adams to friendly newspapers.

The couple's political partnership was not always beneficial to the president himself as he set policy. As a sounding board and confidant, for example, Abigail Adams urged her husband to go to war with France, but he wisely ignored her advice, according to historians. The maintenance of U.S. neutrality in the conflict between France and England during Adams's administration is viewed as one of his biggest achievements.

Unfortunately, John Adams did side with his wife in support of the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which made it a crime for newspapers to print "false, scandalous or malicious writings" against members of Congress and the president. Although the law provided for truth as a defense, the press of the day mixed fact and opinion, and it was impossible to prove the truthfulness of opinions. The acts resulted in fines and imprisonment for Jeffersonian editors who criticized the Adams administration. Ignoring the First Amendment, Abigail Adams rejoiced when a congressman was sentenced to four months behind bars for opining that John Adams had an "unbounded thirst for ridiculous pomp."

With the presidential election of 1800 partly a referendum on the two acts, voters chose Thomas Jefferson and repudiated Adams's bid to stay in office. The acts expired, and anyone still imprisoned under them was pardoned. John and Abigail Adams returned to Massachusetts from the unfinished White House in Washington, where they had moved

toward the end of their term and where she had hung her laundry in the East Room. Like Martha Washington, Abigail Adams helped define the position of the first lady, demonstrating that a president's wife could play a substantial role if her husband encouraged her to air her opinions.

Jefferson, a widower, invited the popular Dolley Madison, wife of his close friend and political ally Secretary of State James Madison, to serve as his hostess when his daughter was not available. Endowed with a warm and charming personality, the buxom Dolley Madison was seventeen years younger than her learned husband, who presented a wizened appearance and lacked the social acumen she displayed in behalf of his career. Jefferson considered her an example of Republican womanhood, a lively partner for the powerful but also, according to historian Catherine Allgor, "astute enough to appear politically null." No Abigail Adams in forthrightness, Dolley Madison exhibited a tactful manner and sunny disposition, conversing amiably with those of all political persuasions.

Nevertheless, her role at Jefferson's side was enough to cause scandalous rumors that found their way into print. Political opponents of Jefferson and Madison inferred that she was the president's mistress, in part because the Madisons initially had lived with Jefferson in the White House after moving to Washington. They attacked the morals of both James and Dolley Madison along with those of her sister and brother-in-law, claiming the husbands had used the wives as prostitutes to further their own careers. One congressman referred to the rumors in speeches, and innuendo about the purported scandal appeared in a Baltimore newspaper.

A Quaker widow in Philadelphia who had helped run

a boardinghouse before her marriage to Madison, Dolley was wounded by the accusations, but they had little effect on her husband's political career. Elected president in 1808 as the candidate of Jefferson's Democratic-Republican party, he was reelected four years later. His first opponent, Charles Pinckney, in a wry tribute to Dolley Madison's social graces, claimed he "was beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison."

As the first presidential wife to move into the White House at the beginning of her husband's term, Dolley Madison took full advantage of her opportunity to set the tone for the administration and to establish precedents for her successors. Two Madison scholars, David Mattern and Holly Shulman, commented, "Through her conduct she defined republican manners and created republican rituals that affirmed the political legitimacy of her husband." After persuading Congress to appropriate funds to renovate the rundown mansion, the "Lady Presidentress," as she was called, staged a lavish public reception each Wednesday night that drew so many guests it was called "Mrs. Madison's crush" or "squeeze." The center of attention in elegant outfits including trademark turbans ornamented with huge birds-of-paradise feathers, Dolley Madison, in the words of a nineteenth-century writer, "looked and moved like a queen." But with her snuffbox, engaging smile, and unassuming manners, she still conveyed democratic informality, making the White House a neutral public space where officials and nonofficials alike could maneuver for political advantage.

She soared further in public esteem when the British attacked Washington during the War of 1812 and burned the White House. Not leaving until the British were almost at her door, she made sure the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George

Washington and other documents of state were saved before fleeing herself. Upon returning to the capital, she was elected the "first directress" of the Washington City Orphans Asylum, the first of many formally organized projects of presidents' wives.

To a greater extent than Martha Washington and Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison became a celebrated public figure. The *National Intelligencer,* a Washington newspaper that was read throughout the young nation, mentioned her favorably. An early magazine used a woodcut engraving copied from her portrait as an illustration for its cover. This occasion was the first of many to come when the likeness of a president's wife was used, in the words of Carl Anthony, a biographer of first ladies, "to grace a publication." Leaving Washington in 1817, Dolley Madison moved back to the capital after her husband's death in 1836, living across the street from the White House and reigning as a grande dame.

At her death in 1849 when she was eighty-one, President Zachary Taylor stated, "She will never be forgotten because she was truly our First Lady for a half-century." Never before had the term *first lady* been used in public, but it was a fitting recognition of the way Madison had acted "to solidify an important role for the President's consort," as another historian of first ladies, Betty Caroli, put it. In her later years, Madison advised presidential families on White House entertaining, a tangible gesture of her influence. According to Caroli, the title of first lady, not used in Madison's lifetime, did not take firm hold with the public until 1911 when a play by that name based on the Madisons became popular. Robert P. Watson, another scholar of first ladies, pointed out there is no consensus on the origins of the title but instead

"competing theories and arguments surrounding its development." In spite of the controversy, few would argue that Dolley Madison had not earned the title.

Not surprisingly, her successor found it difficult to follow her performance. President James Monroe's elegant and regal wife, Elizabeth Monroe, created an uproar by refusing to make visits to wives and daughters of members of Congress. The women of official Washington retaliated by boycotting the White House. Pleading ill health, Elizabeth Monroe stayed away from Washington when she could. Her attempt to hold informal White House receptions proved unsuccessful; a newspaper wrote of the disgusting nature of the people who attended, including "some whose heads a comb has never touched, half hid by dirty collars."

London-born Louisa Adams, the daughter of an American merchant, helped her husband, John Quincy Adams (a son of John and Abigail Adams), win the presidency in the disputed election of 1824, which was decided by the House of Representatives. She called on wives of congressmen, entertained frequently, and held a magnificent ball in honor of her husband's rival, Andrew Jackson. This mammoth event led *Harper's Bazaar* to declare, "Everybody who was any body was there." Yet once in the White House, John Quincy Adams was unable to push his program through Congress, and his administration failed, while his wife coped with depression.

Louisa Adams, who had endured twelve pregnancies and seven miscarriages between the ages of twenty-one and forty-two, became a virtual recluse. An accomplished singer and harpist, she spent time in the White House writing plays and sketches revealing the unhappiness of her earlier years, when she had said that "hanging and marriage were strongly

assimilated." She was incensed when opposition newspapers printed charges that her husband had improperly spent government funds to buy a French billiard table for family use and that she had undemocratic ways due to her English birth. In self-defense, she wrote an unsigned biographical account of her life for a Washington newspaper, *Mrs. A. S. Colvin's Weekly Messenger.* Probably to her relief, her husband overwhelmingly lost his reelection bid to Andrew Jackson after a dirty campaign in which Adams's backers accused Jackson's wife, Rachel, of immorality.

Surprising to us today, when first ladies are perennial subjects for women's magazines, presidents' wives were not featured in the sex-segregated publications born in the decades before the Civil War. *Godey's Lady's Book,* the most important of the new women's magazines, and its imitators did not write about the men's world of politics or the women who claimed some part of it, at least not until after they were dead. To write about the living was seen as somewhat disrespectful in an era dominated by the "cult of true womanhood," which called on women to exemplify four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

By contrast, during the Revolutionary War period, women such as Martha Washington and Abigail Adams had played key economic roles, managing family holdings while the men were away and acting as business partners with their husbands. As economic conditions improved in the new nation after the War of 1812, the situation changed dramatically. The ideal of the "lady" emerged, personified by wan females who did not work and were supported by male relatives. In the popular mind, ladies sat in parlors, dressed in elaborate outfits, and occupied themselves with genteel pursuits such

as writing sentimental poetry and holding tea parties. Seen as passive and often in ill health due to childbearing, the lady was not expected to venture into the man's world of money-making and politics. Neither was she supposed to be exposed to the glare of public attention. According to nineteenth-century convention, a lady's name properly appeared in newspapers only three times: when she was born, in an announcement; when she was married, in a wedding story; and when she died, in an obituary. Women's magazines such as *Godey's,* although they published contributions from women, often shielded their writers from public notice by using initials or pen names to mask their identities.

Consequently, before the Civil War, news of presidents' wives remained relatively sparse in the newspapers and magazines, except for an occasional mention that found its way into print in the guise of political comment. After the vital presence of Dolley Madison, the role of the first lady was diminished for decades, with various female relatives of presidents frequently filling in for absent or ailing wives, since it was clear each president needed a hostess. With some exceptions, the first ladies and their stand-ins got relatively little attention.

Andrew Jackson's wife, Rachel, died before he took office, distressed by partisan attacks on her character for allegedly marrying Jackson before her divorce from her first husband was final. Jackson's successor, Martin Van Buren, another widower, escorted Dolley Madison to social events and gained an official hostess when Madison introduced her cousin Angelica Singleton to Van Buren's son Abraham. Within months, the two were married and Angelica Singleton was installed in the White House, where she copied

European royalty by dressing in white and assembling a group of women who resembled ladies-in-waiting to attend her. Her pretensions did not benefit her father-in-law, a Democrat, who was accused of behaving like a king. In the next election, he was replaced by an Indian-fighting Whig, Gen. William Henry Harrison, who died in 1841 only a month after his inauguration. Harrison's wife, Anna, never set foot in Washington.

When Vice President John Tyler, called "His Accidency," became president, his invalid wife, Letitia, "modestly shrank from all notoriety and evaded the public eye as much as possible," Carl Anthony noted. When she died in September 1841, the *National Intelligencer* printed the conventional praise accorded demure nineteenth-century ladies—that she had been "a Wife, a Mother, and a Christian."

In striking contrast, the second Mrs. Tyler, thirty years younger than her husband, did not subscribe to the cult of true womanhood and craved publicity before and during her White House years. At nineteen, Julia Gardiner, known as the "Rose of Long Island," had shocked her wealthy parents by posing in fashionable clothes for a lithographed handbill signed with a rose to advertise a New York clothing store. Within six months after the death of Tyler's first wife, the flirtatious belle had accepted the president's invitation to play cards at the White House, where he started a fervent courtship by chasing her around tables. The couple eloped in June 1844 after Gardiner's father and two members of Tyler's cabinet were killed in a shipboard explosion while on an excursion with the president.

The twenty-four-year-old Julia Tyler determinedly made a social splash in the eight months remaining in Tyler's

term, taking advantage of the changing newspaper climate in the 1840s to actively draw attention to herself. After using Gardiner money to refurbish the White House, according to a contemporary report, she surrounded herself by "twelve maids of honor" and held receptions while seated "upon a raised platform wearing a headdress formed of bugles and resembling a crown." She also started the custom of having bands play "Hail to the Chief" to give the presidency a royal flourish.

Her White House performance was made to order for the new penny press of the day, which tried to attract readers with colorful human interest stories instead of partisan political comment. Tyler assiduously cultivated F. W. Thomas, the Washington correspondent for the *New York Herald* (the leading penny newspaper), who fawned over the "Lovely Lady Presidentress" in *Herald* stories that often were reprinted in other papers. He told readers she was superior to Queen Victoria and "the most accomplished woman of her age." Her brother Alexander also wrote rhapsodic newspaper accounts of her regal entertaining that served a political as well as a social aim: her parties helped push the annexation of Texas, the biggest accomplishment of John Tyler's undistinguished presidency.

The Tylers were followed by a different kind of couple, Sarah and James Polk—political partners in the tradition of John and Abigail Adams. Sarah Polk, who had no children, served as her husband's secretary and advised him on the conduct of the Mexican War. A devout Presbyterian, she banned hard liquor and dancing at the White House, but she dressed elegantly, entertained appropriately, avoided controversy, and won praise for her sweet and sincere manner. De-

termined not to be just a housekeeper, she declared before Polk's election in 1844, "If I get to the White House . . . I will neither keep house nor make butter," a spirited response to a comment that the wife of Henry Clay, Polk's opponent, churned good butter and had a spotless house. Yet Sarah Polk was not an advocate of women's rights, distancing herself from the Seneca Falls convention in 1848 that launched the drive for woman suffrage.

Approving her religious decorum, a Nashville newspaper applauded her dignity and "salutary influence." On her departure from Washington in 1849, a national women's magazine, *Peterson's,* lauded her in a poem ending, "You are modest, yet all a queen should be." As Betty Caroli said, since magazines up to that time did not write about living women, "the singling out of Sarah Polk for such a gesture indicates that she had attained unusual prominence." Furthermore, the gesture was a harbinger of what was to come—increasing public attention to the position of first lady as new forms of printed products stimulated public curiosity about the appearances and activities of presidents' wives.

Sarah Polk's immediate successors, however, were throwbacks to the days of the first Mrs. Tyler. Margaret Taylor, the wife of Zachery Taylor, kept to herself in the upper rooms of the White House. She refused to sit for her portrait or even a "photograph" (a daguerreotype, an early form of photography). After President Taylor died in 1850, an engraver who was eager to sell depictions of the deathbed scene but did not know what Margaret Taylor looked like concealed her face with a large handkerchief.

The presidency fell to Vice President Millard Fillmore, whose wife, Abigail, had taught school before and even

briefly after their marriage, making her the first president's wife to have held paid employment. She set up the White House library but had her daughter substitute for her as a hostess. Although in declining health, the bookish Abigail Fillmore could not totally avoid the spotlight, as her image became an item of commerce. Copies of her daguerreotype sold well, especially among women.

When Franklin Pierce was elected president in 1852, his wife, Jane, stayed upstairs in the White House for two years, mourning the death of her son in a train accident. After that time, she occasionally went out but continued to mourn. Her aunt took over as hostess. Victorian sentiment made it possible for Jane Pierce to avoid any duties without being criticized, just as it accepted delicate health as a rationale for other first ladies who avoided public lives. The cult of true womanhood allowed nineteenth-century presidents' wives to live in virtual seclusion if they did not seek social eminence. Women such as Jane Pierce, who abhorred her husband's political career, were offered a convenient personal escape from a male-oriented world.

By the time the nation was on the verge of the Civil War, the role of White House hostess took on new visibility with the advent of Harriet Lane, the niece of President James Buchanan, a bachelor. As his administration floundered, Lane tactfully organized seating arrangements at the White House to keep Northern and Southern enemies apart. Her likeness appeared in the pages of the new illustrated newspapers that were gaining favor with women readers and wide distribution by rail. In 1858, *Harper's Weekly* referred to Lane as "Our Lady of the White House," and two years later, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* printed her engraving and commented

below it, "The subject of our illustration . . . may be justly termed the first lady in the land."

When Mary Todd Lincoln arrived in Washington in 1861, newspapers on both the East Coast and the West Coast called her simply "first lady." Her husband and others in the White House referred to her as "the Lady President" or "Mrs. President." Eager to show official Washington that she and her husband were not uncouth westerners, she purchased expensive gowns and set out to redecorate the White House. At first, *Leslie's* praised her "exquisite taste," admiring the "moulded [*sic*] shoulders and arms of our fair 'Republican Queen.'" Improved printing technology led to the use of engravings based on actual photographs, enabling readers to see her attire and demeanor. As Jennifer Fleischner, a recent biographer, put it, "She reveled in the creation of her image, born in the columns of the daily newspapers that rolled off the steam presses in unprecedented numbers, midwifed by the special correspondents who, reporting on Mrs. Lincoln's comings and goings, telegraphed their dispatches to papers throughout the land." A thirst for intimate details even led to false reports that she was pregnant.

Unfortunately, Mary Lincoln kept quiet about her visits to wounded soldiers and her assistance to freed slaves. Knowledge of her charity might have quelled talk of her alleged disloyalty, but she took no steps to make herself a sympathetic figure. Exploding over trifles and increasingly erratic, she disintegrated mentally following the death of her eleven-year-old son, Willie, in 1862. She could have taken refuge in mourning as Jane Pierce had done, but she instead chose to continue appearing in public as first lady.

She showed fortitude in the White House by insisting

on playing a visible, if misguided, part in the administration. After Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865, her bizarre behavior led her eldest son to have her committed to a mental institution, from which she won a battle for release. Although extremely unsuccessful, she had tried to enlarge the position of first lady, but history does not remember her kindly.

Eliza Johnson, the tubercular wife of Vice President Andrew Johnson who followed Lincoln as president, fell back into the pattern of the reclusive wife. She stayed upstairs at the White House and left entertaining to her daughters. Thus, the tradition continued of having youthful surrogates who fit the accepted definition of femininity stand in for a president's wife who desired to abdicate a public role.

The pattern changed dramatically in the person of Julia Grant, a self-confident woman with a zest for entertaining. She relished life in the White House when her husband, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, the Civil War hero who had led the North to victory, was elected president in 1868 and reelected four years later. Cross-eyed and stout, the unpretentious Julia Grant liked attention, even though unflattering comments were printed about her looks, and she posed for photographers in profile to conceal her eye condition.

By Grant's era, a first lady's wardrobe, personal style, and social activities had become legitimate news. Presidents' wives and families were logical subject matter for enterprising women writers who, often using pen names to shield themselves from being considered unladylike, sent columns of human interest material from Washington to dozens of competing newspapers in big cities across the country. Among them was Emily Edson Briggs, who wrote as "Olivia"

for the *Philadelphia Press.* Describing a White House reception for her readers, she called Julia Grant "fair, fat and forty."

Although her showy White House entertaining, which included twenty-nine-course dinners, rivaled or exceeded that of the maligned Mary Lincoln, Julia Grant experienced only muted press criticism. Mary Clemmer Ames, the Washington columnist for a prominent New York publication, *The Independent,* sniffed that Grant was "born without the natural gifts or graces which could have made her a leader of other minds" but noted that her "good nature" went "far to take the place of higher and more positive characteristics." Since the social climate of the Gilded Age after the Civil War emphasized conspicuous consumption, there was no outcry when she ordered 587 pieces of new White House china in 1870 and added hundreds more for the resplendent 1874 wedding of her daughter, Nellie. The scandals of Ulysses Grant's second term, which included corruption among cabinet members, did not faze his wife, even though she was on close terms with some of those implicated. When she urged her husband to run for a third time and he refused before telling her so, she wrote in her autobiography, "I did feel deeply injured."

Lucy Hayes, Julia Grant's successor, brought a pious note to the White House. Known as "Lemonade Lucy," she refused to serve alcoholic beverages, wore no jewelry, and took pride in her Methodist religion, holding prayer meetings with her husband, President Rutherford Hayes, and singing hymns. Ames, who became a close friend, credited Hayes with "that tender light in the eyes which we have come to associate with the Madonna" and called her "the first lady of the land." Other correspondents followed suit.

The first president's wife who was a college graduate, Hayes was praised as a representative of the "new woman," a term then coming into use for educated women with broader interests than entertaining. She seemed a likely candidate to speak up for woman's rights, a cause often allied with the temperance movement, and women's education. When the first lady remained silent, Emily Briggs upbraided her in a column as being "so high and far away that you cannot hear the groans of the countless of our sex." Hayes geared her role in the White House to that of a traditional wife, but extensive press attention to her temperance stand expanded the concept of the influence of a president's wife. Journalists also raised the question of whether the first lady should be expected to exert influence on behalf of women's issues.

Hayes's strict policy against serving alcohol was overturned by the next first lady, Lucretia Garfield. She was in the White House for only six months before a disappointed office-seeker assassinated her husband, but she gave one press interview—in defense of the character of James Garfield's controversial secretary of state, James G. Blaine—that showed she had a surprising willingness to speak out politically. Ames wrote that Garfield had "a strength of unswerving absolute rectitude her husband has not and never will have."

The next two presidents, Chester A. Arthur, the vice president who succeeded Garfield, and Grover Cleveland, who was elected in 1884, had no wives when they took office. Arthur, a widower, tapped his sister to be his hostess. Cleveland, the only Democrat since the Civil War, was one of just two bachelors ever elected to the office (the other was Buchanan); he drafted his sister, Rose, a college teacher who passed the boredom of receiving lines by mentally conjugat-

ing Greek verbs. When Cleveland entertained a widow, Emma Folsom, and her twenty-one-year-old daughter, Frances, in 1885, newspapers speculated he was planning to marry. So he was, but the bride was not the widow as expected but the daughter, a recent college graduate twenty-one years his junior.

When they wed in a private White House ceremony in 1886, pictures of the virginal-looking bride in newspapers and magazines entranced the public. Riding a wave of sensationalism called "new journalism" that was led by Joseph Pulitzer in New York, reporters camped around the Clevelands' honeymoon cottage in western Maryland and spied on the couple with binoculars. The gruff president accused them of "making American journalism contemptible" in a letter to the *New York Evening Post,* although the bride, nicknamed "Frankie," appeared unfazed by the attention. As a writer of the period put it, if she were royalty, "she could not bear with greater ease, tact and graceful dignity the burden of social leadership which has fallen upon her."

As industrialization lifted middle-class living standards in the late nineteenth century, women as readers and consumers became increasingly important to publishers. Newspapers started women's and society pages featuring department store advertising aimed at women. A new base of national advertising for standardized food products led to the establishment of profitable women's magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping.* Readers of both newspapers and magazines avidly perused stories on first ladies and their families, who were glorified as idealized representations of the American spirit.

In addition, the widespread use of photography created

a visual popular culture in which images of the first ladies were used, without their permission, on items as varied as dinner plates, campaign posters, buttons, and souvenirs. A picture of Lucy Hayes was used to advertise an iron, and advertisers seized on Frances Cleveland's name and likeness to sell soap, perfume, candy, and other products in fraudulent testimonials. To protect her, legislation was introduced in Congress forbidding the unauthorized use of a woman's likeness or representation, but it did not pass.

Public enthusiasm for Frances Cleveland initially helped defuse criticism of her husband's private life, which had become a factor in the 1884 campaign when Cleveland acknowledged that he might have been the father of an illegitimate child born to a widow with whom he and others had had relations eleven years earlier. During his reelection bid in 1888, opponents circulated stories that he mistreated his wife. In response, Frances Cleveland, who tried to keep aloof from politics, authorized publication of a letter in which she expressed the wish that all American women had husbands "as kind, attentive, considerate and affectionate as mine."

Although Cleveland lost that election to Republican Benjamin Harrison, he regained the presidency in 1892; his campaign posters featured pictures of Frances Cleveland placed above and between images of himself and his running mate. On her return to Washington, Frances tried to keep her children (three by the end of the second term) apart from the public and press after tourists on the White House grounds almost smothered the oldest with kisses. Her efforts gave rise to ugly rumors that the children were deformed. Seeking privacy, the Clevelands rented a house several miles away and spent family time together there.

Benjamin Harrison's wife, Caroline, died shortly before the end of his presidential term. Despite ill health, she had overseen the renovation of the White House, modernizing the kitchen and adding electric lights and private bathrooms. In addition, she was the first president-general of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and she agreed to raise funds for the Johns Hopkins Medical School only on the condition that it be a coeducational institution. With a keen sense of public relations, she arranged for publicity pictures of her grandson, "Baby McKee," who became the most photographed child in the United States. She received more recognition for starting the White House china collection, however, than for her interest in women's organizations, and she was lauded for her domesticity.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the president's wife had become a national public figure, whether or not she sought to be one, as improved communications media wiped out distances across the country. Americans insisted on seeing photographs of their first lady. Yet she was not necessarily expected to demonstrate personal capability. Even if incapacitated, first ladies could be used as political props, Caroli concluded, and they were praised for "sweetness and docility over independence."

This fact was illustrated in the case of Ida McKinley, a probable sufferer of epilepsy who demanded constant attention from her husband, William McKinley, elected president in 1896 and reelected in 1900. She appeared in formal, posed photographs, wearing lace and diamonds that gave her a doll-like appearance. To counter rumors that she was insane, she was featured in the first campaign biography of a presidential candidate's wife. The president's devotion to his infirm

spouse won him admirers, and the country readily accepted an invalid first lady, just as it had accepted surrogates for much of the century.

Expectations for first ladies changed dramatically during the twentieth century as the United States became a world force. U.S. presidents played key parts on a global stage, closely watched by news media that became increasingly powerful. Presidential wives emerged as vital aspects of the presidency itself, although the individuals holding the title of first lady defined their roles differently.

As the first president to take office in the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt brought new energy to the position, which he assumed in 1901 after McKinley died from an assassin's bullet. Roosevelt and his wife, Edith, along with their six high-spirited children and innumerable pets, shook the White House to its rafters, yet they still maintained a social schedule with an aristocratic flavor. Recognizing the growing importance of the Washington press corps, the president instituted regular press briefings. Edith Roosevelt hired the first person to handle publicity for the first lady, a move that helped establish the president's wife as an official figure and laid the foundations for her paid staff.

Social secretary Belle Hagner systematized the release of social news and monitored the coverage and images of the Roosevelt family that appeared in newspapers and magazines. Edith Roosevelt endeavored to limit direct contact with members of the public while still satisfying their curiosity. Her picture appeared alongside her husband's, but she maintained her personal privacy. "I haven't talked to the press, not in seventy-one years, and it's too late to begin now," she snapped at a reporter late in her life.

Her ambitious successor, Helen Herron Taft, had prodded William Howard Taft to run for president and loved living in the White House, where she saved $100,000 of her husband's salary by instituting household economies. She made no secret of her influence. In 1909, readers of the *Ladies' Home Journal* found out that "had it not been for his wife, Mr. Taft would never have entered the Presidential race." Unhappily, the first lady suffered a stroke that curtailed her activities two months after the inauguration. Reporters were not told about the stroke and did not raise questions, operating under an unspoken agreement, in effect for at least the first decades of the twentieth century, to separate the first lady's public role and private life.

Two women served as first lady during Woodrow Wilson's tenure as president from 1913 to 1920, gaining public attention in vastly different ways. Wilson's first wife, Ellen Axson Wilson, a talented artist whose paintings had been reprinted in women's magazines, was stricken with Bright's disease while backing a campaign to rid Washington of unsanitary alley dwellings occupied by African Americans. She died on August 6, 1914, after telling her husband that if the alley improvement bill was passed, she would "go away more cheerfully." In her honor, Congress passed the legislation, but no provision was made to provide housing for the displaced.

Seven months after her death, Wilson, a man accustomed to drawing strength from supportive women, was introduced to Edith Bolling Galt, the widow of a well-to-do Washington jewelry store owner. A passionate courtship ensued, leading to their marriage on December 18, 1915, despite press criticism that an appropriate period of mourn-

ing had not passed. The new first lady, who came from impoverished southern gentry and had little formal education, devoted herself entirely to her husband. She served as his confidant during the reelection campaign of 1916 and U.S. entry into World War I the following year and accompanied Wilson to the Paris peace talks in 1918.

When the president suffered a stroke in October 1919 and was incapacitated for the rest of his term, Edith Wilson became his chief aide, engaging in a cover-up of his true condition rather than urging him to resign. She decided who and what he should see and attempted to act as a go-between with Senate leaders in an unsuccessful effort to get the United States to accept the Treaty of Versailles and join the League of Nations. With the presidency functioning poorly, newspapers revealed her extraordinary power; the *London Daily Mail,* for example, on February 22, 1920, disclosed the "startling" news that "the wife of President Wilson has for months past been acting President of the United States."

In her autobiography, Edith Wilson explained naively, "I, myself, never made a single decision regarding the disposition of public affairs. The only decision that was mine was what was important [to refer to the invalid president] and what was not, and the very important decision of when to present matters to my husband." A recent biographer, drawing on newly disclosed medical reports, concluded that Woodrow Wilson was totally unfit to continue in office and that his wife persisted in "sustained inventions that were consequential for all the world."

According to Lewis Gould, a scholar of first ladies, Edith Wilson still is seen as an example of the dangers that could arise if a presidential wife seeks real power. It is not

likely that any first lady ever again could shield an ill husband and hold the reins of the presidency, for the Twenty-fifth Amendment to the Constitution calls for a clear succession of power in case the president is incapacitated. But the case of Edith Wilson continues to provide a rationale for journalists to keep a watchful, and somewhat suspicious, eye on the first lady.

Women finally got the vote in 1920, making the publicity-conscious Florence Harding, wife of Warren G. Harding, the first president's spouse to be able to vote for her husband. Heavily involved in his political career, she felt an affinity for journalists because she had long served as the manager of Harding's newspaper in Marion, Ohio. Mary Randolph, White House social secretary during the 1920s, commented, "I am sure the Presidency meant more to her than it ever did to Mr. Harding. . . . I have it on good authority that when the [Republican] Convention nominated him, she said: 'Well, Warren Harding, I have got you the Presidency; what are you going to do with it?'"

In Washington, Florence Harding showed a special fondness for members of the Women's National Press Club, founded in 1919 by women who had covered the suffrage movement; for them, instituting the new club was a way of combating hostility from male journalists who would not admit women to the National Press Club. Inviting the group for a cruise on the presidential yacht, the first lady astounded the women by slapping the dignified club president, Cora Rigby of the *Christian Science Monitor,* on the back and exclaiming, "Well here we are, all girls together." Opening the White House grounds to visitors, the "Duchess," as the sixty-one-year-old Harding was called, posed for numerous pic-

tures, including those for newsreels shown in movie theaters. To try to appear more youthful, she made liberal use of cosmetics, which were just then becoming generally accepted.

Careful of her public image, she did not serve alcoholic beverages openly in the White House, consistent with Prohibition, which was then the law of the land. But she privately mixed drinks for Harding and his associates and socialized with the flamboyant Evalyn Walsh McLean, owner of the Hope diamond. As a key adviser to her husband on politics and patronage, Florence Harding took a particular interest in World War I veterans and felt betrayed when a personal friend who was put in charge of the Veterans Bureau turned out to be corrupt, like a number of other Harding cronies given high offices.

In spite of her policy of not permitting interviews and direct quotations, she invited women journalists to tea and, according to her biographer, Carl Anthony, "proceeded to 'chat' for attribution." Recovering from a near-fatal illness and heavily made up, she greeted women journalists in the White House living quarters in 1923, wearing a rose-colored velvet negligee. She answered questions about her health and social matters, giving so many details about her illness that it "revolted" one reporter. A contemporary reporter, Ishbel Ross, found the excitable Duchess uneven in her press contacts, initially refusing, for example, to tell reporters what she would wear to the inauguration, though she later tried "for some rapprochement" but failed to "carry it far." For the most part, Harding received favorable press treatment, which depicted her as a housewife who helped her husband in business and politics.

After President Harding died unexpectedly in 1923, the

Duchess took most of his and her private papers out of the White House and destroyed them. The move was an apparent attempt to conceal the widespread corruption of Harding's administration, which produced the Teapot Dome scandal, involving the illegal sale of government oil reserves, and other instances of malfeasance. Her actions also may have been intended to conceal Harding's numerous sexual dalliances.

Grace Coolidge, who followed Florence Harding, had tended to overshadow the Duchess even as the wife of the dour vice president, Calvin Coolidge. Younger and considered more charming and attractive than her predecessor, Coolidge was portrayed as another Dolley Madison when she became first lady after Warren Harding's death. Press enthusiasm only heightened after the taciturn and curt Calvin Coolidge won the presidency in his own right in 1924. His slender, vivacious wife humanized the administration. Ishbel Ross, her biographer, said, "From her first day as mistress of the White House she presented a picture of dignity and warmth." She willingly posed for numerous photographs that showed her in the fashionable flat-chested, low-waisted outfits of the day, many of which were picked out by her husband. Her picture appeared in all types of publications, including the new tabloid newspapers, which were aimed at big-city readers, as well as mass-circulation magazines. When one of her two sons died of blood poisoning in 1924, she received an outpouring of sympathy and affection.

A graduate of the University of Vermont and a former teacher of the deaf, Grace Coolidge managed to make the Jazz Age compatible with the image of a reticent New England housewife. She smoked cigarettes, then considered daring for a woman, but only in private. The public relished

details of her frequent appearances at ceremonial events and her precedent-setting invitations to stars of stage, screen, and radio to visit the White House. Journalists praised the first lady's sparkling wit, even though she said very little. Calvin Coolidge refused to let her give interviews or make speeches, and he forbade her to ride horses, drive a car, fly in an airplane, bob her hair, "wear culottes for country hiking, or express her views on politics, or in any way step out of character as wife and mother," Ross continued. "Not that she showed any disposition to do so, and whatever views she may have had she kept to herself," Ross added. Reporters for women's and society pages eagerly sought descriptions of her gowns, entertaining, busy schedule, and appealing manners, although the Coolidges were not always forthcoming even with innocuous items. As Randolph, the social secretary, explained, "How difficult my own position was it would be impossible to describe to any but a sympathetic tight-rope walker. If I withheld information, I was 'in wrong' with the Press. . . . Had I given it, I wouldn't have been of the slightest value to the President and his wife." One political observer said Grace Coolidge was "worth one million dollars a year to the Republican Party."

Calvin Coolidge's decision not to seek reelection in 1928 cleared the way for Herbert Hoover and his intellectual wife, Lou Henry Hoover, called "The Lady," to move into the White House. The reserved Lou Hoover took little interest in her wardrobe and lacked the flair for public appearances that had been Grace Coolidge's strong suit. Unlike her successor, Eleanor Roosevelt, Hoover "failed to win the country's approval or its interest," according to Betty Caroli.

Yet the cosmopolitan Lou Hoover possessed an extraordinary background. The first woman in the United States to earn a degree in geology, she was a graduate of Stanford University, where she met Herbert Hoover, a mining engineer. With their two sons, the couple lived all over the world before Herbert Hoover became secretary of commerce under Harding. Fluent in five languages (including Chinese), Lou Henry Hoover had joined her husband in translating a Latin manuscript on mining into English and organized relief committees in Europe during World War I. As national president of the Girl Scouts and head of the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation, she had promoted women's fitness, although she opposed women's participation in the Olympics as unhealthy.

Hoover was the first president's wife to speak over the radio, addressing various groups, including Girls Scouts and 4-H Club members, and urging women to volunteer to aid the unemployed. Nevertheless, she had little public rapport, giving out stiff photographs of herself and refusing to permit pictures to be taken of her grandchildren. Her insistence that the White House staff stay out of sight in the halls and respond to hand signals instead of speech while serving meals was in line with the reticence that made some observers consider her aloof.

Ross noted that Hoover refused to give interviews and was "a problem for the press." She and her husband entertained extensively, but they issued last-minute invitations, and reporters could not get lists of White House guests in time to meet deadlines. Ross recalled Hoover was "at her best" when she led women reporters on an outing at the presiden-

tial retreat, Camp Rapidan, where they "almost felt that they were welcome."

When the Depression hit in 1929, the first lady, long known for her benevolence, did not publicize her numerous charitable efforts. Her distrust of the press heightened after southern newspapers lambasted her for inviting the wife of an African American congressman to tea at the White House in 1930. As one biographical sketch put it, the first lady "became increasingly suspicious of what she saw as an ever-present, intruding press corps that often did not place a priority on accuracy." When Herbert Hoover overwhelmingly lost his reelection bid to Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, she left Washington with bitterness, convinced the Democratic party had smeared her husband in the campaign.

After Hoover, Eleanor Roosevelt seemed a godsend to Washington women reporters because her press relations "were founded on mutual trust," Ross explained. True, Roosevelt relied on affable relations with journalists. But she also built on solid underpinnings based on the development of the institution of the first lady, which, by 1933, was instrumental in setting the tone for presidential administrations. During her twelve years of media contact as the president's wife, Roosevelt readily grasped the growing demand for news from the White House to feed the appetite of the expanding mass media, eager for pictures, stories, and sounds to attract an audience.

Roosevelt realized that the job of first lady required development of a public persona separate from the actual person who had the title. By holding press conferences, giving interviews, posing for photographers, and welcoming

coverage of her ceaseless rounds of travel and activity, as well as through her close friendships with select women reporters and her general availability to journalists, Roosevelt helped generate the news that journalists needed to do their jobs. In return, reporters generally pictured her favorably, although some remained alert to news conventions that emphasized conflict and controversy in her era, just as they do today.

Roosevelt had the advantage of working with news media that allowed her to separate her public role from segments of her personal life. By giving most of what she made to charity, she was able to continue her own career, earning money from her newspaper column, magazine articles, radio broadcasts, and lectures. In public, she discounted her involvement in administration policy and patronage matters, possibly to downplay the criticism heaped on previous presidents' wives who were believed to hold power.

In private, as Caroli pointed out, "Eleanor peppered her letters to friends with references to her attempts to influence both legislation and appointments." She was part of the first network of activists to promote women's political advancement, marked in the Roosevelt administration by the appointment of Frances Perkins, the first female cabinet member, as secretary of labor. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt held garden parties in the 1930s at the White House to facilitate networking among professional women living in Washington. Whether she emphasized or downplayed her activities, perhaps her most striking accomplishment as first lady was, in Caroli's words, her "resolve to use the press, rather than let it use her." She succeeded so well that presidents' wives after her have reacted to her example of ac-